

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

ARE RELATIONSHIPS WITH BRANDS  
PROBLEMATIC OR BENEFICIAL TO  
CHRISTIAN FAITH?

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLE OF FAITH BRANDS IN THE FAITH  
DEVELOPMENT OF MEMBERS OF SOME EAST MIDLANDS CHURCHES

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## STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work contained in this thesis is original except where due reference is made.

It has not been and shall not be submitted for the award of any degree or diploma to any other institution of higher learning.

Signature:

## **Abstract:**

*This study is a work of Practical Theology aiming to create an interpretative paradigm within which to evaluate faith brands theologically and identify whether faith brands are problematic or beneficial to Christian faith. The research used qualitative research techniques – five focus groups drawn from a church in the East Midlands, triangulated with interviews with practitioners in both marketing and ministry, and documentary analysis of faith brands. An element of comparison was possible between focus groups by grouping those church members who self-identified as “charismatic/evangelical” into three groups and examining how the data generated in those groups compared with the other two groups, drawn from a more “central Anglican” tradition.*

*The importance of relationships and the motif of the faith being a journey and a process are validated by the data. Some of the problematic issues that faith brands raise for Christian faith – including challenges of ecclesiology, and the risk of a reductionist approach to faith – are considered both from the perspective of faith brands (such as the Alpha course) which might be considered as “McDonaldising” the faith, as well as the perspective of more “localized” faith brands, embodied within the “Fresh Expressions” movement.*

*The results suggest that whilst faith brands do pose risks for Christian faith – including the danger of reductionism, or challenges to traditional ecclesiology - they can also be beneficial where they are utilized in ways that are sensitive to the context in which individuals are relating to them.*

*This PhD makes an original contribution to knowledge through by exploring in detail the impact of faith branding upon some members of East Midlands Churches, in itself an original focus of study. It also makes an original contribution by utilising the insights of Rational Choice Theory to interrogate the data and extends the field of Practical Theology in also beginning to develop a constructive theology of branding. Tracing the contours of an emerging theology of branding, the Apostle Paul’s contextual missionary flexibility is noted alongside an acknowledgement that creation is both fallen, and yet also nevertheless pregnant with goodness and grace. It is suggested (through drawing on insights in the work of Cavanaugh) that faith brands can be located comfortably within an Augustinian framework with respect to notions of choice and desire. Within a theological evaluation, faith brands could be seen to offer a way of seeking to influence the will towards to God – and as such, offer a counterpoint to consumer brands, because they are a means to what is*



*understood theologically to be a true end (God), whereas in consumerism, the end is simply to continue desiring to buy. Finally, the notion of the missio Dei and Bosch & Sherry's theology of the work of the Holy Spirit are offered as ways of understanding of how God works through human culture and human creativity.*

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## **I – Introduction – purpose, context and epistemological foundations.**

In contemporary British society, our lives are increasingly influenced by brands. We live in what the anthropologist Sherry (1995) has referred to as “brandsapes”. More often than not, the symbolic associations of brands are such that they tell us enough about an object that more description is unnecessary to conjure up an image in the mind of the person we are speaking to. We can talk about our “favourite old pair of Levis,” or “our old Hoover,” and people in a given social context know what we mean. Branding affects many areas of our lives; major corporations like Microsoft often feature on news stories, pop stars are increasingly marketed as brands, and even in the sphere of politics, brand management is seen as key - hence Philip Gould’s memo to the Labour Party hierarchy, leaked in July 2000:

“I fear the New Labour brand has been badly contaminated” (Spencer, 2000:21).

Gordon Brown’s more recent riposte as he announced he was standing down as an MP was instructive, but again underlined the importance – and contested nature – of branding in public life. (<http://www.theguardian.com> [online])

In addition to politics, the language of branding is part of higher education, and even creeps in to the politics of national identity – on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2011 Leighton Andrews, the Education Minister in Wales accused the University of Wales of bringing “the brand of Wales into disrepute” following a poor QAA report that expressed concern about some of the university’s overseas link-ups. ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) [online])

Religion is not immune to branding either. One spectacular recent example of a branded “mega-church” getting into difficulty was recorded in October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010, when the *Wall Street Journal* reported the \$48m bankruptcy protection filing of the Crystal Cathedral. Among the creditors listed was \$147,225, owed to Lutzker & Lutzker, a Washington, D.C law firm whose services were used by the church, and who specialise in intellectual property. Of those interviewed, one small business CEO, owed \$2,000 dollars, explained that they had supplied the church with bespoke neck-ties for the gift shop, made especially for the church with an outline logo of its angular glass cathedral. Critics were quick to pounce – an article in *The Guardian* on 5<sup>th</sup> November argued that “when religion is reduced to a collection of gimmicks, there is little to stop it falling victim to changing fashions”.

Twitchell (2007) offers a satirical but insightful glance into this world, and some of the extremes that religious branding in America can lead to. In the end, his conclusion on the topic is mixed – he sees the ridiculous, but also some glimpses of the sublime in some aspects of the ministry of mega churches and other branded religious organisations.

Here in the UK, it is also evident that branding has reached the religious sphere. Things may feel less extreme than the experiences Twitchell (2007) comments on, but even a brief foray into a local Christian bookshop will quickly reveal a plethora of national and international faith brands that impact people's faith journey – from the ubiquitous *Alpha* Course to alternatives such as Christianity Explored, to Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven* series, to the many "worship artists" who form the contemporary worship "industry", to festivals such as New Wine, Soul Survivor and Greenbelt. Einstein (2007) has catalogued examples of how this "faith branding" not restricted or unique to Christian faith, and Carette & King (2005) have documented the packaging and reselling of aspects of Eastern religions in what they see as consumerist strands of new age spirituality.

Faith branding is evident in social media too. A recent spoof video uploaded onto YouTube parodied the style and prevalence of Christian faith brands (Youtube [online]). It claimed to advertise the "Porpoise Drive Life" – a clear satirical reference to a well-known Christian faith brand, Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven* series (Warren, 1995). The fact that this video went viral within the Christian community, being viewed and forwarded from friend to friend electronically serves to highlight both the ubiquitous nature of faith brands within church culture, and also the existence of critical awareness of some of the potential issues that branding and marketing could potentially raise within the Church.

This thesis will examine the role of branding in late modernity, and the role of faith brands in the faith development of members of a selected number of churches in the East Midlands. The study, from the perspective of Practical Theology, asks whether relationships with brands are beneficial or problematic to Christian faith, with reference to the role of Christian faith brands in the faith development of members of some churches in the East Midlands.

## ***1.1 – Definitions – what is a brand?***

Brands have been around for a long time. Stobart (1994) argues that branding has been used since the earliest times to distinguish the goods of one producer from another. The word “brand” derives from the Old Norse word *brandr*, meaning “to burn.” Brands were a means by which owners of cattle could mark their animals as their own. From branding cattle and other livestock, humankind began putting their mark on all sorts of other things as well – so a potter could place a thumbprint into the wet clay on the bottom of a pot, or make some other form of mark, like a cross, a star or a circle. The potter, by identifying their products in a specific way, was able to provide their customers with a means of recognising their products.

Nevett (1982) argues that it is in the last five hundred years, particularly since the industrial revolution, that branding has really taken off. From well known local, to national, and then international brands, transport and printing were two key factors. Looking at two American examples, cited by Stobart (1994:2), as the railways made coast to coast transportation faster and cheaper, companies that invested in expanding their operations and opening up new markets in different geographic locations became aware of the importance of developing a brand name for their products that people all over the country would recognise. Mr. Procter and Mr. Gamble’s soap-making business in Cincinnati and Mr. Kraft’s cheese-making business in Chicago both prospered at the expense of (arguably) less daring and resourceful competitors. Their high quality, branded, differentiated products began to establish them as leading producers right across the USA, and this process was repeated all over the world.

This rapid development of branding and advertising in turn led to rapid developments in trade mark law. From the earliest times, people recognised the importance of protecting their marks from the dangers of counterfeiting – or recognised the financial opportunities it might entail. The Belgae (ancient Celts), for example, exported large quantities of counterfeit Roman pottery into Britain prior to Julius Caesar’s invasion. For hundreds of years Roman products had been available, at a price, to the Ancient Britons and had come to be prized by some of them for their superior quality and sophistication. Some of the Belgae had developed a thriving trade in counterfeit Roman pottery with fake brands –

squiggles which their customers thought were Latin. No doubt not all potential customers were fooled, but the result was enriching the potters of North Eastern Gaul at the expense of the Romans (Stobart, 1994:3).

Over the centuries, and particularly in the last few hundred years, trademark laws have been developed to try and prevent counterfeiting, and now exist in virtually every country in the world. The first Trade mark Bill in the United Kingdom was drafted in 1862 and became law in 1875. The first registered trade mark in Britain was the Bass Red Triangle, a mark still in widespread use today. In fact, many brand names which are powerful today were first launched over 100 years ago. Coca-cola was launched in 1886, and Quaker Oats, Heinz Baked Beans, Jaeger underwear and Ivory soap were all leading brand in the 1880s and 1890s. Branding and advertising have grown together into the industry we know today.

So it is that in our world, where many goods and services compete for our attention, brands act as one of the most significant ways in which we distinguish between the different products that are available. Keller, (2002:151) notes the classical definition of branding from the American Marketing Association, is that a brand is “a name, term, sign, symbol, or combination of them that is designed to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of their competitors.” Whenever a marketer creates a new name, symbol or logo for a new product, they have created a new brand.

Brands are more than just logos or trademarks, however, as business studies academics Barwise, Dunham, and Ritson, (2000:73f) acknowledge:

Some focus on the brand as trademark, such as David Aaker from the University of California, Berkeley, for whom it is: “A distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.” Others, such as Jean-Noel Kapferer at the HEC School of Management in Paris, fix on what it means to the consumer: “A brand is not a product. It is the product’s essence, its meaning, and its direction, and it defines its identity in time and space.” This is a view to a large extent supported by Stephen King from the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency: “A product is something made in a factory; a brand is something bought by a consumer. A product can be copied by a competitor; a brand is unique. A product can be quickly outdated; a brand is timeless.

We might conclude that King is exaggerating when he says that brands are timeless – there are plenty of examples of dates or defunct brands. But it is clear that although a brand has a set of trademarks, such as a brand name, a logo and sometimes other identifying marks, these symbols do not exist in isolation. Rather, they identify the brand to people, and act as agents of communication. Brands are connected a product's essence, or meaning. Brands are “multidimensional constructs” (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998:417). However multidimensional our model of branding might be in its scope, brands can nevertheless be understood to play a clear role - in “matching a firm’s functional and emotional values with the performance and psychosocial needs of consumers” (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998:418). Brands may well start out as products, with a set of functional and physical qualities, but over time their values are enhanced as they build relationships with consumers.

Writing about brands as being able to “build relationships with consumers” makes one reflect on the language of the “powers” in the New Testament (cf. Eph 6:11-13; Col 1:15-17; Col 2:14-16; see also Wink, 1984, 1986, 1992). Literature about brands often makes them sound like *hypostases* with a life of their own, albeit that like the New Testament “powers”, these powers are not ultimate, but provisional and temporal. Brands provide consumers with choice, reassurance and convenience; they are a kind of “shorthand” which enables consumers to make informed purchasing decisions.

Coca-Cola provides a good example of how these two aspects of branding – logos/trademarks, and essence/ideas/associations - work together. Coca-Cola in and of itself is a trademark name, with a number of registered trademarks and designs; special script, distinctive shaped “Coke” bottles, red and white livery and so on. Like many companies, Coca-Cola employs an army of intellectual property lawyers to ensure that no one else infringes these symbols. But the value of the Coca-Cola brand is not bound up in these symbols alone. The reason Coke is so valuable is because of the ideas, perceptions and expectations about it that consumers all over the world carry in their heads – so much so that one Coca-Cola executive has stated that if the company were to lose all its production-related assets in a disaster, it would survive, but if all consumers were to have a



sudden lapse of memory and forget everything related to Coca-Cola, the company would go out of business (Rangaswamy, Burke, Olivia, 1993:61-75).

Millions of people have built up positive perceptions and expectations about Coca-Cola over a long period of time. Because of this, they will choose it over other brands even if it is more expensive (and sometimes *because* it is more expensive) than cheaper alternatives. Coca-Cola, as a brand, is ingrained into our lives. It has developed a brand personality, and transcends social and global boundaries as a familiar friend, a fact noted by Andy Warhol (cited in Keough, 1994:31)

What's great about America is that this country started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching the TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke, and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All Cokes are the same, and all Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum on the corner knows it and you know it.

Keough (1994:31) observes that most of us have “shared our happiest times - love, laughter, family days, celebration - in the companionship of Coke. Coca-Cola is simply a part of life. Perhaps in the end, that is the secret of brand power.”

So a brand is a shorthand to enable consumers to make purchasing decisions – it has a recognisable logo and name, but it is much more than a logo. A brand embodies the essence and values of a particular product.<sup>1</sup>

This makes brands a fundamental part of modern life; and when one considers the nature of sign and symbol and why it is important in human meaning making it is not hard to see how this relates to the religious paradigm, given the role of sign and symbol in Christian history.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.2 - Background to the study**

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<sup>1</sup> We might also suggest that in a consumer society, brands might also embody the status quo in life for some people - would such people perceive there to be a “lack” if the ubiquity of brands was removed?

<sup>2</sup> Semiotics is a huge subject, but a brief introduction – albeit concerned with an evangelical approach to the semiotics of communication – can be found in Downing (2012).

In fact, however, relatively little has been written on the subject of branding and Christian faith. Bartholomew and Moritz (2000, ed.) brought together a collection of essays relating the teaching of Christ and Consumerism, and a theological symposium in Sheffield also covered the subject. One or two more popular books (such as Benton, 1999) have attempted to provide a quick, but in the author's view, simplistic and negative response to the phenomenon of branding. More recently Carrette & King (2005), have critiqued the way in which "new age" spirituality and consumerism enshrine (rather than offer an antidote to) shallow materialism, at the same time reflecting orthodox politics, curbing self-expression and colonising eastern beliefs. Einstein (2007) has also analysed the use of marketing methodology by mainstream religious groups in the US, and the effect of this in making the secular sacred and the sacred secular. However, neither study attempts a Christian (or other) theological response to branding in general.

Building on Giddens' (1991) notion of the post-traditional society, Grant (1999), a branding advocate working in the marketing industry, has argued that brands are instrumental to being able to successfully navigate through modern life. There is a plethora of marketing and sociological literature about brands or consumption which also points to branding as ubiquitous (see, e.g., Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2000), de Chernatony & Dall'Omo Riley (1998), Keller (1998), Lury (2004)). More recently, Usunier & Stolz (2014) edited an interdisciplinary collection of essays from specialists in marketing, sociology and economics to explore the commoditization of religion, the link between religion and consumer behaviour, and the economics of religion, specifically about the question of religion and branding. Although insightful, none of the essays attempted to analyse the way in which Christian faith brands act in the lives and faith development of church members, or to comment theologically on the subject from a Christian perspective in any way.

The church has always claimed to be concerned with the whole of human life (cf. Ps 24:1; Rom 12:1-2; and so on). Many Christians have assumed branding to be an almost purely negative phenomenon (Benton, 1999). As Einstein (2008) shows, however, others seem to have uncritically swallowed modern marketing techniques. Consequently, there is a need for theological reflection on how people relate to brands and their role in late modern society.

This thesis aims to investigate people's perceptions of the role of faith brands on the development of their faith. It centres on the members of some churches in the East Midlands, using focus group discussions to gather data, and comparing this with data gathered from interviews with experts and documentary analysis of particular faith brands. The aim, from the perspective of Practical Theology and in dialogue with empirically gathered data, is to assess whether relationships with brands are beneficial or problematic to Christian faith in the context in which it is explored.

### ***1.3 – What is a Christian Faith brand?***

As the brief selection of contemporary examples in the introduction of this thesis demonstrated, religion is not immune to the phenomena of branding. Einstein (2008) contends that in order to be incarnated within a consumer society, faiths have had to develop brands – easily recognisable symbols and spokespeople with whom religious searchers can make connections. Christian churches, denominations and organisations have not been slow to adopt branding as a means of spreading their message and trying to make connections with existing Christians or spiritual explorers.

A brief examination of the *Purpose Driven* brand shows how this works. Purpose Driven is a book, but also a brand, and one means of perpetuating the brand has been through the course called 40 Days of Purpose. Behind the brand is its author, Rick Warren, the Pastor of Saddleback church in California. Warren has a high US media profile, and uses this to market the books and the course, which started out as a course designed to help pastors grow their churches by attending to the needs of their people, in line with five key New Testament purposes. These are to:

- Love the Lord with all your heart
  - Love your neighbour as yourself
  - Go and make disciples
  - Baptise them
  - Teach them to obey
- (Warren, 1995:103-106)*

Warren himself is the personality behind the brand, which has expanded to include other linked titles (the best known of which is *The Purpose Driven Life*, a course written as a book to help Christians grow in their faith, Saddleback-style), and utilises all sorts of different

media avenues, as well as promotion through links to pastors, Christian conferences and other major Christian events, all of which are sub-branded under the “Purpose Driven” title. Christian branding has well and truly been born. As I have already argued, although brands are defined in many ways, they are best understood as a shorthand, combining two aspects - a recognisable logo/name and also communicating the essence and values of a particular product. In Christian faith branding, as with the *Purpose Driven* example above, these two aspects of consumer branding can both be seen in action. *Purpose Driven* materials have a recognisable and consistent visual style, and a consistent theological ethos – Christians who engage with their materials can feel confident they know what they are getting. This helps explain their popularity both in the US, and also now in the UK as well.

#### ***1.4 – Researching the impact of branding on Christian faith***

This research project will explore how faith brands in the UK have impacted the Christian faith of members of some selected East Midlands churches in order to discern whether Christian faith brands are problematic or beneficial to Christian faith in an English urban/suburban context. In this regard, I take “Christian” at the outset to mean something at its most simple – a Christian is simply someone who is a follower of Jesus Christ. The etymology of the word “disciple”, coming from New Testament Greek *mathetes*, means “learner”. A Christian is a follower, a learner of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 11:26).

This definition might be considered a little loose as a working definition, however. This research is being carried out from within the Anglican tradition, so in order to root what “being a follower of Jesus Christ” might look like from an Anglican perspective, I also offer the Declaration of Assent, which offers the boundaries provided by scripture, reason and tradition:

#### **Preface**

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the

declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in your care?

### **Declaration of Assent**

I, A B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.

*Common Worship, xi.*

The Declaration of Assent is made during ordination services, but its core statements hold for all Anglicans as an expression of the Church of England's own understanding of the Christian faith (and hence, what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ). As such, it provides this study with boundaries within which faith brands can be assessed in relation to their doctrinal orthodoxy; it should be taken as a given that any faith brand I refer to as Christian falls somewhere within the spectrum of Christian belief recognised by the Church of England as being "Christian" – whether or not I would personally agree with each and every particular aspect of faith that they espouse.

That aside, it should be pointed out that no doctrinal test was asked or required of participants within the researched groups. They were simply willing volunteers who self-identified as Christians in order to be part of the group, but all confirmed they were regular worshippers (twice a month or more) at different Anglican churches. This is significant – the motif of being learners on a journey will emerge as we explore the data from the researched groups. Although it might be argued there will always be an element of subjectivity in trying to discern whether Christian faith brands are "problematic" or "beneficial" to Christian faith, we can look at both participants' perceptions of whether a faith brand has helped them on their faith journey, or whether it has hindered them, and how interactions with the faith brand have impacted upon the way in which they narrate their faith story. Using that, and reflecting on the way in which theologians within and around Anglican have understood the contours of Christian faith will allow us a space within which to evaluate the impact of faith brands.

In the following chapter, we I will lay out the epistemological and methodological framework for the investigation. In chapter 3 I will explore the data that emerged from our study; the faith brands that participants talked about, and their perceptions of the impact of those faith brands on their faith journeys, and examine whether Rational Choice Theory offers a useful lens through which to view the data. In chapter 4 we will explore the perceptions that participants had about the impact of faith brands on the church and wider society. In chapters 5 and 6 we will explore two different debates that emerge from the data – exploring some of the potential dangers that faith brands might pose to historic doctrine or ecclesiology as we ask questions about their potential to encourage reductionism or undermine the role of the church.

Finally, in chapter 7, we will explore some contours of a potential theology of branding. It will be suggested that, despite potential dangers, faith brands can be affirmed theologically. Through drawing on insights in the work of Cavanaugh (2008), faith brands can be located within an Augustinian framework with respect to notions of choice and desire. Within a theological evaluation, faith brands could be seen to offer a way of seeking to influence the will towards to God – and as such, offer a counterpoint to consumer brands, because they are a means to what is understood theologically to be a true end (God), whereas in consumerism, the end is simply to continue desiring to buy. The notion of the *missio Dei* and Bosch (1991) & Sherry's (2002) theology of the work of the Holy Spirit will also be offered as ways of understanding of how God works through human culture and human creativity.



## **2 – Methodology: epistemology, organization and approach, research methodology, ethical considerations.**

### **2.1 – Epistemology, Research Paradigms, and Ontology**

Practical Theology is an academic discipline complementary to those of Biblical Studies or Systematic Theology that examines and reflects on practices in order to understand the theology enacted within them and in order to consider how theological theory and theological practices can be more fully aligned, changed, or improved. This means that Practical Theology itself is a diverse discipline. Swinton & Mowat (2006:3) acknowledge that its range of approaches embraces research which is empirical, political, ethical, psychological, sociological, pastoral, gender-oriented and narrative-based, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> At its heart, Practical Theology locates itself within the diversity of human experience. In agreement with Ballard & Pritchard (2006:1), I would argue that this is because Christian theology has never been simply a speculative enquiry, but a practical one. Faith has to be lived. Theology is, to use Anselm's phrase, "faith seeking understanding" (Lane, 1984:87). Milbank (2006) agrees, and presses this further, arguing that theology *is itself* a social science (although it is perhaps important to stress here that Milbank would not conceive himself as being a Practical Theologian, but that his work would be described more accurately as resembling systematic theology). Rather than simply borrowing from elsewhere a fundamental account of society – which is not available, since there is no such neutral, rational and universal account - and seeing which theological insights might cohere with it, *all* theology has to reconceive itself as a kind of "Christian sociology", that is to say, "as the explication of a socio-linguistic practice...the constant re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed." (Milbank, 2006:383). For Milbank, the Church itself is already a "reading" of other human societies by virtue of its institution as it defines itself in continuity or discontinuity with other societies – hence it becomes possible to consider ecclesiology also as "sociology".

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Gill (1975, 1977); Fowler (1981, 1987); Patton (1993); Van der Van (1993, 1998); Pattison (1994); Wimberly (1994); Ackermann and Bons-Storm (1998); Ali (1999); Miles (1999); Swinton & Willows (2000). This selection illustrates the variety of perspectives that research in Practical Theology can adopt.



As an academic sub-discipline, Practical Theology locates itself in dealing with Christian life and practice within the church and in relation to wider society.<sup>4</sup> By beginning with people's experience, research in Practical Theology will necessarily draw upon social research methods, and many of the philosophical and methodological questions that underpin such research are shared.

All research is influenced by historically and culturally contingent considerations. Our views of the world and our beliefs about the nature of truth and reality are central to the research task. Crotty (1998) argues that in designing a research proposal, the first two questions that need to be explored are to do with epistemology and theoretical perspective. It follows from this that it is good practice at the outset to reflect on these things and make explicit the philosophical stance that is being taken by the researcher, since this will have a huge influence on the research methodology that is adopted, and how others view the research. There are strong ethical reasons for doing so, both in terms of briefing participants and seeking informed consent, and also in honestly informing interactions with the published research. In addition, as Smart (1973:265) argued, there is a need for "axioanalysis":

It seems to be part of the procedures for one who approaches a religion that he or she should stimulate some degree of self-awareness. It is as though we should undergo axioanalysis - a kind of evaluational equivalent to psychoanalysis: what has been called more broadly "values clarification". Or perhaps we might call it "own-worldview analysis".

### **2.1.1- Research paradigms**

All research takes place in what might be termed a research paradigm – which, as Lincoln & Guba (2000:20) argue, is akin to a kind of net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological premises. It is the broad interpretative framework that guides the researcher's action, explained thus:

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<sup>4</sup> So Ballard & Pritchard (2006:1ff), who present a helpful recent summary of its development as a discipline alongside Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, and Philosophy of Religion, culminating in the establishment in of the International Academy for Practical Theology in 1993, and in the UK, the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT).

All research is interpretative; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed, whereas others are highly problematic and controversial. Each interpretative paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions he or she brings to them.

The trouble is, Practical Theology, like other fields of qualitative research is open-ended and embraces a wide range of perspectives – empirical, political, sociological, gender-oriented and narrative-based – which makes it difficult to tie down and define. As Denzin and Lincoln point out,

the open ended nature of the qualitative research project leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single umbrella-like paradigm over the entire project. (2000:xv)

Nevertheless, it is possible to broadly orientate ourselves in the field of Practical Theology – Denzin and Lincoln are more specific when they define qualitative research in the field:

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (1998:3)

In this respect, there are some more concrete things we can say about the research paradigm that forms the basis for research in Practical Theology – but before that, we must explore some epistemological and ontological considerations in order to be clear about the underlying view of reality that has shaped my approach to this research.

### **2.1.2 - Epistemological and ontological considerations**

Epistemology and ontology are distinct, but very closely related. Epistemology concerns what constitutes valid knowledge, and how we can obtain it; ontology is concerned with what constitutes reality and how we understand existence.

Bryman (2016:24) defines an epistemological issue as something which concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge within a discipline. In a

sense, epistemology is bigger even than that, since as Swinton & Mowat (2006:32) contend, as a branch of philosophy it seeks to answer not only the question “How can we know what we know?” but also the question, “How can we know at all?” How one answers this question has important implications for how we look and what we see within the research process.

Ontology is closely related to epistemology, and describes the assumptions one makes about the objectivity or subjectivity of reality. Corbetta defines ontology as:

...the question of 'what'. It regards the nature and form of social reality. It asks if the world of social phenomena is a real and objective world endowed with an autonomous existence outside the human mind and independent from the interpretation given to it by the subject. It asks, therefore, if social phenomena are 'things in their own right' or 'representations of things'. The problem is linked to the more general philosophical question of the existence of things and of the external world. Indeed, the existence of an idea in the mind tells us nothing about the existence of the object in reality, just as a painting of a unicorn does not prove the existence of unicorns. (2003:12)

Creswell (2003:6) argues that researchers make claims about what is knowledge (ontology) how we know it (epistemology) what values go into it (axiology), how we write about it (rhetoric) and the processes for studying it. He recognises four broad “knowledge claim positions” – postpositivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory and pragmatism, and critiques each. I would contend, however, that Bryman (2016:4; 28-30) is right when he argues that the ontology of social research can be categorised more simply than that, as either a form of objectivism or constructionism/constructivism (positivism on the one hand, and constructivism, advocacy/participatory and pragmatism all being subsumed under the one heading of constructivism). It seems to me that whilst advocacy/participatory and pragmatic models offer new insights, they are essentially types of constructivist approach rather than completely new angles on this debate.

Objectivism as an ontological position argues that social phenomena and their meanings exists independently of social actors. Discourse or events have an existence of their own. There are links between this and positivism, arguing that reality is objective and can be discovered by researchers. This potentially leads to the construction of universal laws which can be applied to the social as well as the natural sciences, and in that context are seen as measurable by experimentation.

Positivism (or postpositivism, as it has evolved – Phillips & Burbules, 2000), broadly argues for a scientific and empirical method in research. Positivist epistemologies are deterministic in their philosophy, and whilst postpositivists are clear that absolute truth remains elusive, nevertheless they hold a conviction that attempting to remain objective, and testing hypotheses are valuable methods in the quest for truth.

Whilst aspects of positivist approach are admirable, its shortcomings in relation to qualitative research are well documented.<sup>5</sup> In particular, qualitative social research relies primarily on ideographic, rather than nomothetic knowledge, the bedrock of qualitative research, in contrast with the verifiable data of quantitative research.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, philosophically – and particularly, theologically – there are serious problems with any epistemology that relies on verification as a requirement for truth, since this invalidates or collapses the richness of truths that cannot be quantified or verified using empirical method into a scientific box they simply cannot be captured by.<sup>7</sup>

Constructionism or constructivism, in contrast, is an ontological position arguing that any social phenomena and its subsequent meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. Phenomena and their meanings are in a constant state of revision and that the researchers account of the social world is itself a construction. In this sense, a typical constructivist might argue (in contrast with an objectivist) that no objectively true statements are possible, since all individuals view reality through their own cognitive filters, which have themselves been shaped.

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<sup>5</sup> For a theological example of this, see Farley (1983).

<sup>6</sup> For a deeper analysis of the contrast between the two approaches, see Damaris (2001).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Swinton & Mowat's (2006:42) discussion on the question, "Can a scientist love his wife?"

Verification is fine when it comes to nomothetic knowledge, but cannot comprehend ideographic knowledge. It is perhaps also worth noting here that not all Christian thinkers have seen positivism as being incompatible with Christian faith. Hick's (1967) notion of "eschatological verification" attempts to reconcile logical positivism and Christian faith by arguing that the presence (or absence) of eternal life will ultimately provide the grounds which prove or disprove the reality of Christian faith. Hick's famous explanation of this takes as an allegory a quest to a Celestial City (1967:177). In this parable, a theist and an atheist are both walking down the same road. The theist believes there is a destination, the atheist believes there is not. If they reach the destination, the theist will have been proven right, however if there is no destination on an endless road, this can never be verified. This is an attempt to explain how a theist expects some form of life or existence after death and an atheist does not. They both have separate belief systems and live life accordingly, but logically one is right and the other is not. If the theist is right, he will be proven so when he arrives in the afterlife. However, if the atheist is right, they will simply both be dead and nothing will be verified. For Hick it follows from this that Christian belief is compatible with the logical positivists' criterion of verification as a "mode of cognition to which the alternatives "veridical or illusory" properly apply" (1967:169). Though for Hick the world is sufficiently ambiguous to be interpreted theistically or atheistically, nevertheless, "the theistic assertion is indeed—whether true or false—a genuinely factual assertion" (1967:195).

Significantly, however, in a constructivist perspective meaning can emerge from the shared interaction of individuals within human society – it is not simply nihilism. Human behaviour and understanding, seen from this viewpoint, are in an active process of construction and interpretation. As Swinton (2001:97) notes, the meaning and definition of reality is therefore flexible, and open to negotiation depending on circumstances, perception, knowledge, power structures and so forth. If there is controversy over particular meanings, such as where several definitions exist for the same reality, then the meaning of that reality is negotiated and defined according to the interpretative framework which the individual uses to make sense of their experiences of reality.

From the standpoint of Practical Theology, which is undertaken both in the church and in the academy, it is important to stress that accepting a constructivist viewpoint does not mean assuming that reality is nothing but a social construction. A methodologically constructivist stance would helpfully emphasise that our ability to understand and define what is reality is always filtered through a process of interpretation and construction that is influenced by a number of social, cultural, spiritual and interpersonal factors:

In making the familiar strange, the qualitative researcher acknowledges the polyvalent and interpretative nature of reality and seeks to describe what situations look like when phenomena are viewed from different frames of reference...taken together these stories and experiences lead us closer and closer to an approximation of what reality might look like. (Swinton & Mowat 2006:35)

There is a distinction however between taking a methodologically constructivist stance, which is helpful for qualitative research, and a thorough-going ontological constructivism, which would prove problematic for Christian theology. There are proponents of constructivism who would argue that reality is inaccessible and constructivism is all there is (Denzin, 1997). From the standpoint of Practical Theology, however, if reality is totally inaccessible, then so is revelation, which leaves systematic theologians with quite a problem on their hands. This is a difficulty that needs to be addressed, since it appears that Theology itself, as it offers a perspective on knowledge, truth and reality comes into conflict with other methodologies, notably the interpretative paradigm. The answer in part lies in correlational methods, such as those forwarded by Tillich (1951, 1957, 1963) and developed since (see, e.g., Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005). Correlation involves engaging theology with contemporary culture, and vice versa. This approach recognises that the realms of human-to-human reason and enquiry are capable of manifesting God's truth, even if that

remains to be brought to completion by a more complete revelation in Christ.

This premise is taken further by some contemporary theological perspectives (such as those of feminist theology) who argue that extra-theological sources and insights are often necessary as critical correctives to the failures and distortions of Christian history (Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005:138). Arguably, these historical/critical correctives are themselves part of an approach to theology which incorporates what the Islamic studies scholar Montgomery Watt (1963) calls “reality matching”. Similarly, from the perspective of Baptist theology, McLendon Jnr. (1982:20) has argued that the process of theological reflection involves “the discovery, understanding and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.” Weller (2005:185) develops this further, arguing that:

as a matter of *description*, theological and ecclesiological reflection cannot be undertaken within a closed circle of the Christian community in abstraction from its social and historical context. But, in addition, as a matter of *prescription*, the ‘reality-matching’ involved in evolving adequate theological and ecclesiological approaches requires sociological analysis... Thus the task of theology can no longer be conducted in an intellectually, morally, or socially responsible way unless it proceeds within a perspective that takes full account of the reality of the diversity of religions and of their implications for Christian personal and corporate existence.

Graham, Walton & Ward (2005:139) argue that the dialogical qualities of the correlational method have two key dimensions, the apologetic and the dialectical. The apologetic seeks to utilise prevailing thought forms in order to indicate how Christianity fulfils and completes human questions. The dialectical stresses the possibility of theological understanding being glimpsed in “secular” thought forms and argues that these make a vital contribution to a living theological tradition. Understood in this way, the correlative method, with its emphasis on a critical stance against “taken for granted” knowledge, its acknowledgement that knowledge is sustained by social processes, and its acknowledgement of the importance of historical and cultural specificity, appears to be in accord with many of the key notions of constructivism.

The correlative method is not without its critics, however. Pattison and Lynch (2005) have described the variety of approaches taken within Practical Theology, but in recent years there has been a growing methodological debate about whether social theory/theology are

in an equal dialogue (as in Graham, Walton and Ward, (2005) or Stoddart (2014)), or whether theology necessarily has to take priority (see, for example, Swinton (2006, 2012) and Milbank (2006)). Ward (2012:2) has suggested the theological and socio/cultural are held together in Christological terms in the image of Christ offered in Colossians I, in whom *all things hold together*.<sup>8</sup> He argues that understanding is an ecclesial act that is both theological and social/cultural, with Christ at the head (2012:3). However, whilst that might offer a theological lens through which to view the question, it does not really answer it, although the collection of essays within the book he is introducing do at least outline the contours of the debate.

For Swinton (2012:86) the fundamental concern with the methodological position assumed within mutual critical correlation appears to be the conviction that theological truth is emergent and dialectical and therefore requires partnering with other sources of knowledge that will enable clarity and revise ecclesial practice. For Swinton, this undermines the concept of revelation and unchanging doctrine. Swinton (2012:87) also has reservations about how “mutual” this conversations really are in practice – and the danger that theology is reduced, particularly in models where ethnography assumes both description and explanation. With Milbank (2006) he also questions the way in which social theory provides explanations for what goes on in particular contexts according to causes that lie outside theology. As Baxter (2001:35) observes, the problematic result of this is that

“in Aristotelian-Thomistic terms, final and formal causes are ruled out of explanations altogether, in favour of efficient causes, deemed to be the only causes that meet scientific standards of empirical demonstration and verification. And for Milbank, the solution, in the same terms, is to retrieve this medieval vision of causality such that events and actions can be explained in terms of complex interrelationships of final, formal, and efficient causes, the overall operation of which is ultimately mysterious and can only be accounted for in traditional theological categories.”

So for Swinton (2012), the danger of the correlative approach is that it might confuse efficient causes with final and formal causes – with history and experience then becoming the focus instead of eschatology and God. The solution, for Swinton, lies in the notion of hospitality rather than correlation, and giving theology priority. The problem with this, however, is that, as Graham (2013) observes, Swinton and Mowat’s (2006) insistence on giving theology priority leaves no space for practice and experience to be revelatory. I

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<sup>8</sup> cf Col 1:15-20, esp. v17

would add that it leaves little space for a Pneumatology or a concept of the *missio Dei*, and is in danger of subsuming God's revelatory activity into ecclesiology. Webster (2012:222) mitigates this by arguing that Theology is not one science among others, but inquiry into God and all other things ordered in some way to God, and as such, is inquiry into the conditions for all science, including social science.

So where to go with the debate? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the resolution for me as an Anglican researcher is found in the writings of Richard Hooker, and his formulation of the Anglican Tripod of Scripture, Reason and Tradition.<sup>9</sup> For me, Hooker's (1907) framework for understanding how theology emerges in a tradition that is both Catholic and Reformed forms a basis to reframe the debate. I would argue that we do not need to decide whether social theory or theology correlate in mutual critical dialogue or whether one has priority over the other. Rather, in the Practical Theology enterprise, which necessarily involves the use of social research tools and questions (Reason) alongside hermeneutical work on Biblical texts (Scripture) and questions being asked of and by church doctrine (Tradition), Theology emerges. In that sense, Theology is both primary but also able to dialogue without assertion; it may well change traditional interpretations of Scripture or reform and renew aspects of Tradition, but that does not imply that Theology *itself* is secondary in the research process. I recognise that this understanding of the role of Theology would perhaps be challenged in some church traditions – ecclesiology, tradition and theology are perhaps not so easily distinguishable when looking at this methodology from a Roman Catholic or Orthodox perspective – but it seems to me to be an approach that offers currency from an Anglican vantage point.

Having outlined an approach to Practical Theology that notes and clarifies the relationship between theology and social theory we then need to turn back to our epistemological foundation. Swinton (2001:97) proposes, there are constructivist epistemologies that are compatible with a theological worldview. This epistemological position is found on a continuum between a naïve realism that accepts that truth can be fully accessed through human endeavour and a radical relativist absolute constructivism. It is a form of mediated or critical realism that accepts that reality can be known a little better through our

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<sup>9</sup> For a good brief introduction to Hooker and more on how the relationship between Scripture, Reason and Tradition takes shape within an Anglican understanding, see Redfern (2000:20-22).



constructions while at the same time recognising that such constructions are always provisional and open to challenge.

It is for these reasons that I selected Critical Realism as my primary methodological and epistemological stance; a stance offering a middle way between naïve objectivism and radical relativism that is useful for grounding Practical Theology. Critical Realism works well as a way of understanding reality and within the kind of model of undertaking Practical Theology that I have outlined above. Bhaskar (1975, 1989) is perhaps among the most influential proponent of critical realism today, and Critical Realists utilise both inductive and deductive methodologies. Critical Realism also fits well with the attitude towards reality found in the thinking of the apostle Paul which both has a conviction about the existence of an ultimate Reality but also a sense of humble provisionality about the extent to which that Reality can ever be fully grasped:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor 13:12 – NRSV)

Critical Realism also allows the axiological dimensions of the research to be reflected on, since unlike postpositivist perspectives which highlight neutrality, constructivism accepts the impossibility of neutrality and instead allows researchers to own and actively discuss their biases and interpretations, although not uncritically – see Creswell & Clarke, (2007). Again, this is crucial to the character of Practical Theology, which as I stressed earlier, sees itself as dealing with Christian life and practice within the church and in relation to wider society, and might therefore be characterised as critical-confessional in approach (as in Graham, 2008).

In conclusion, having critically evaluated different research philosophies and approaches for the design of an appropriate research methodology in Practical Theology, I have discounted positivist/post-positivist approaches, and qualified the way in which the constructivist tradition and the stance of Critical Realism inform my approach by offering a helpful way forward between naïve realism and the radical relativism of some constructivist epistemologies. Critical Realism allows one to adopt a methodologically constructivist stance without having to adopt an ontological constructivism. This stance can facilitate Practical Theology whilst grounding it in a research paradigm that is rigorous enough for the academy.

## **2.2 – Organisation and approach.**

This study is a work of Practical Theology aiming to create an interpretative paradigm within which to evaluate faith brands theologically. Swinton & Mowat (2006) argue that Practical Theology tends to focus on ideographic knowledge – trying to describe, interpret and understand the world - therefore a qualitative research methodology adopting an interpretative approach, intended to identify theological themes connected to the life experiences of participants, is an appropriate research design for this study.

The interpretative approach that underpins the qualitative research method adopted here means that as a researcher I am involved with the research process as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretative experience through the facilitation and moderation of the focus groups and interviews with practitioners in addition to interpreting the data gathered from the focus groups and other informants. As Graham, Walton, & Ward (2005) note, there are a number of well-respected models for undertaking this kind of research. Within their sevenfold typology, and noting the debate about the relationship between theology and social theory outlined above, the “Correlation” method appears to relate well to the research question in mind (an early example of which can be found in Tillich (1951, 1957, 1963)). It allows a dialogical approach to understanding people’s relationships with brands, and the kinds of data gained through focus groups and semi-structured interviewing would provide fruitful ground for theological reflection. Pattison’s (1989) adaptation of a well-known practical theology method, the pastoral cycle, provides a helpful example of this in what he terms “mutual critical conversation” in which the Christian tradition, the social sciences and the situation being explored can be held together in what he metaphorically describes as a conversation between friends – friends who have differences, but who also have much in common and much to learn from one another.<sup>10</sup>

The research approach is inductive, shaped by the underlying research philosophy as described above and the research questions that have prompted the enquiry. The research

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<sup>10</sup> Van Deusen-Hunsinger (1995), provides further reflection on how it might be possible to bring together theology and the social sciences without them collapsing into one another. Drawing on Barth’s interpretation of the Calcedonian definition, she suggests that the relationship between the two disciplines might be analogous to the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ in terms of indissoluble differentiation, inseparable unity, indestructible order, and what she terms the logical priority of theology (which of course places her within the realist tradition outlined in 2.1, and on Swinton/Milbank’s side of the Practical Theology methodology debated outlined in that section).

involves a mixed methods approach, which includes running focus groups, and triangulating the results of these with documentary analysis of faith brands and semi-structured interviews with experts in both ministry and marketing. Bryman, (2016:502) argues that focus groups hold particular potential for research questions in which the processes where meaning is jointly constructed is of interest.

The early development of the research strategy and design is based in the earlier Masters of Research (MRes) programme, the successful completion of which provided the ground work for the development of the methods associated with this larger study developing it into a PhD thesis. The MRes was completed as part of the “New Route PhD” journey and consisted of a Masters degree, which included methodology modules (such as the assignment mentioned here), as well as a longer research project/dissertation that served as the first phase of this research. Progression to the full PhD depends on successful completion of these modules, and the dissertation, on which an upgrade Viva is based. As the Integrated Route Extended Regulations on the relationship between research reported in the MRes Thesis and the following PhD thesis make clear, the material which makes up the MRes Independent Research thesis is expected to provide the core material for the further development of the research and the preparation of a full doctoral thesis. It is expected that during the doctoral stage, the research will advance significantly as the on-going research leads to new insights and re-evaluation of early material.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of this study, data was initially generated through running three focus groups, drawn from an Anglican church in the East Midlands. None of them were asked beforehand whether they self-identified as Christian, although all were regular attendees of the church. My aim was that the number in the groups would be between 4-8 members. Morgan (1998) argues that this is large enough to give diversity (and on a practical level, allow for “no shows”) and small enough to allow members to have space to participate. This number mirrors Livingstone & Lunt’s (1994) study on audience responses to audience discussion programmes (cited in Bryman, 2016:505).

My original aim had been to draw my first groups from three contrasting churches, to allow an element of comparison within the research design; however, the difficulty of getting

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<sup>11</sup> This is the approach outlined in *Section C3: Integrated Route Extended Regulations on the relationship between research reported in the MRes Thesis and the following PhD thesis*, found in the University of Derby’s PGR Regulations, August 2015. <http://www.derby.ac.uk> [online]

sufficient participants from churches forced me to run three groups from one church instead initially. This was not ideal in terms of being able to compare and contrast the perceptions of Christians from different traditions. I was, however, made aware prior to the focus groups that some members of the church had had some experience of at least two faith brands – Alpha and New Wine – and also self-identified with a theological position that might broadly be termed “charismatic evangelical.” Consequently, I took the decision to run a focus group with them altogether, in order to see if their perceptions differed from other members of the church in the other two focus groups who had not as overtly aligned themselves with particular faith brands.

When this proved to be the case, and having had more time to gather research groups, I subsequently ran two additional focus groups from two other Anglican churches that self-identified as “charismatic evangelical” and were also younger in age (Group D in their 40s, Group E in their late 20s/30s, in comparison with Groups A-C who were mixed but in their 50s, 60s and 70s), to continue this element of compare and contrast.<sup>12</sup>

The focus groups were run using a semi-structured interview schedule with set questions as a framework for the focus groups. However, as an interviewer in a focus group setting I was also a mediator and facilitator of the process. I also allowed myself the freedom to prompt or ask clarificatory questions. Following an introductory question about themselves to get the group talking (Bryman, 2016:511), other questions included:

- How their faith had developed, and what in their opinion have been the most significant elements in their faith development.
- Whether faith brands have been significant in their faith journey, and if so, which ones, and how?
- How they thought faith brands may have influenced society, or the wider church?
- Their view of the increasing prevalence of faith brands?

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<sup>12</sup> In the context of this study, the terms “Evangelical” and “Charismatic” are understood within the context of their broad usage within the church in the UK. In the case of “Evangelical”, the term finds its identity within the identification of Scripture as the ultimate authority in matters of spirituality, doctrine and ethics; a focus on the saving death of Jesus Christ as the only source of redemption and hope; an emphasis on conversion as a life-changing religious experience; and a concern for sharing the Christian faith, especially through evangelism (McGrath, 1997:331). In the case of “Charismatic”, the term is referring to styles of theology and worship, which place particular emphasis on the immediate presence and experience of the Holy Spirit (McGrath, 1997:427).

Open questions were selected in order to facilitate participants answering on their own terms; the length of the questions was kept fairly short so that participants were clear what was being asked of them, and the questions started more “factually”, as they narrated their faith history (notwithstanding that as people do this their perceptions shape their memory of the “facts”) and gradually moved from their own experiences into their view of faith brands and their impact on the church and the world around. The number of questions was kept fairly low, but enough to provide a framework and a structure for data collection. Although I did not pilot the questions in a strict sense, as part of my MRes I had conducted a smaller scale study into participants on an Alpha course, and this allowed me to explore the effectiveness of the data that these kind of questions might yield prior to the larger study.<sup>13</sup> This study had shown that the length of the questions was about right that they made sense to participants, and that participants could engage fluidly with the subject with understanding. All of these points tie in with the findings and suggestions of Bryman (2016: 510-11), in relation to how questions should be structured and asked. It might be argued that the questions do presuppose a level of understanding about the subject of faith branding, and an ability to be self-reflexive in relation to one’s faith journey. However, such presuppositions would quickly be proved false if participants were unable to recognise how to answer the questions, or were uncritically hostile or positive about the subject of faith branding without being able to analyse or reference their own faith journey. As we will see, although participants varied in their views on the subject, that was clearly not the case.

Triangulation was made possible by comparing the results of the group with data generated by a qualitative content analysis taken from social media, and brand source materials such as newsletters, and also through semi-structured one-to-one interviews with four relevant “experts” (two local Church of England ministers, a marketing practitioner whose work was outside of church structures, and a Church of England bishop). This qualitative content analysis examined underlying themes in the documents (Bryman, 2016:563-564). More on this is found in section 2.4, on research validity.

I recorded and also made timed notes during the interviews and focus groups, transcribing only “critical incidents”, sections of text that were deemed pertinent to answering the

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<sup>13</sup> MRes – Evidence Based Practice Assignment: A report (account, analysis and evaluation) of a small scale research investigation into an area of your own professional practice. Module title and code: 7PE203 Assignment title: *An investigation into the role of the Alpha brand in the faith development of students at an East Midlands University*. This was one of the methodology assignments that made up my MRes, and prepared me for my initial MRes thesis.

research question. This made the project more manageable and helped me to highlight and focus on particular themes. Coding was used to organise the data, and is covered in more detail in section 2.5, on data analysis. The notion of coding also helped to define what a “critical incident” was – noting Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi and Borgatti (1999:22), critical incidents are “events that exemplify a code”.

It is widely acknowledged that qualitative research methods are well suited to Practical Theology. Swinton & Mowat (2006), highlight how different case study research design approaches have helped the interpretative process in differing research applications. Bryman (2001:47) observes that some of the best-known studies in sociology are based on this kind of design. It allows the hermeneutic, and therefore interpretative small-scale “listening” kind of study of a particular community, location, event or organisation that gives opportunity for detailed theological reflection.

In the case of this research, using focus groups helpfully drew out views and opinions that made the data meaningful. Bryman & Bell (2003:368) note that focus groups typically emphasise a theme that is explored in depth, and involves hermeneutic listening to how the group respond to each other’s views and build up a view for the researcher out of their interactions. They note that focus groups are a well-used research technique within disciplines such as marketing, and I would argue that as such, the topic of branding lends itself quite naturally to such an approach.

Focus groups have well documented limitations, however, as I found during the course of my research. Bryman & Bell (2003:380f), consider that these include the researcher having less control over proceedings compared with an individual interview, and the difficulty of transcribing and analysing the data which may suffer from participants speaking over each other or inaudible recording due to there being more than one speaker. These were not so much of a problem for this study, however. Managing the group through planned trigger questions helped to keep the discussion on track, and although the process of discerning different voices clearly made listening and transcribing a slower process than the one-to-one interviews, it was not too problematic. Making notes throughout the focus group undoubtedly saved a lot of time when listening back and trying to code the data into key themes.

One element of Bryman & Bell's analysis of the weaknesses of using focus groups that was applicable to this study, was that the focus groups were difficult to organise. This was not with regard to issues such as ethical clearance or informed consent, but in relation to a more basic issue - getting willing participants to come and take part. As I stated earlier, initially I had hoped to run focus groups from three contrasting church communities. However, despite enlisting the help of their church leaders, sufficient participants to form viable groups could not be convened.

Noting the work of Lincoln & Guba (1985, 2000) cited earlier, I would want to use focus groups from contrasting church communities – probably contrasting in terms of ecclesiology, demographic and worship style - because an element of comparison would help to improve the trustworthiness and validity of the results. In a project of this size, however, that was not practical within the time and resource constraints. Instead, I ran five focus groups - three groups initially from the same Anglican East Midlands church, one of which consisted of people who self-identified with particular faith brands and whose theology was more consciously “charismatic”. I then followed this up with two more groups from two different Anglican churches which self-identify as “charismatic evangelical”. This allowed for some contrast, but also some helpful commonality in terms of how the groups saw faith. To this end, I named the groups A, B, C, D and E, and gave all the group members a first-name alias, which began with the letter of their group. This made comparison between the groups easier when analysing the data (the more “charismatic” group was Group B in contrast to groups A and C in the initial data collection, with the other two more “charismatic” Groups, D and E, being added to the study later to allow an element of comparison and contrast). Reliability and validity were also augmented through triangulation (as mentioned earlier, and to be covered in section 2.4).

### **2.3 - Ethical considerations**

Denscombe (2002:174) notes that all research raises issues that require ethical attention, and risk assessment. A number of ethical considerations were taken into account before commencing the research. Many of these are outlined in SECTION 7 of my RD5 PhD registration document (Appendix A), and as noted there, the research conformed to the guidelines found in the University of Derby's own Research Ethics Policy Code of Practice.<sup>14</sup>

The “Four Principles” (beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy and justice) popularised by Beauchamp & Childress (1994), offers a principled yet flexible approach to ethics in research. This approach embraces many of the strengths (and avoids the limitations) of purely Utilitarian or Kantian ethical frameworks - namely that they can lack a motivational component, that they are founded on a theological model that is no longer appropriate, that they can ignore what might be termed the spiritual dimension of morality, that they overemphasise the principle of autonomy and, as Pojman (1995) has suggested, that they neglect the communal context of morality. In a way, the Enlightenment approach to ethics created this problem by ascribing moral agency to the individual – this made morality no more than one man's opinion and, thus, philosophy became a forum of inexplicably subjective rules and principles. MacIntyre (1984), responding to these weaknesses, argues for a return to a virtue-based ethical theory which at the same time can mitigate some of the criticisms levelled at deontological systems.<sup>15</sup>

I would contend that there is room for a “complementary” position - hence my embrace of the so-called “Four principles”. I agree with Pojman (1995:179), that principles of action are important in largely the way that deontological and utilitarian systems argue. However, the question here is not whether either of these accounts is wrong in what they say, but whether they say enough. Morality is to do with the kinds of action that produce human flourishing; but with virtue ethicists, I would argue that the virtues themselves are constitutive of what human flourishing is, and hence partly define the state of affairs that we ought to be trying to produce by our actions.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.derby.ac.uk/research/uod/ethics/>

<sup>15</sup> For further exploration of MacIntyre's core arguments, see Lutz (2012).



The University of Derby's *Research Ethics Policy Code of Practice* helpfully harnesses the four principles – albeit majoring on beneficence and non-maleficence - and illustrates many of the ethical questions that need asking about running focus groups.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as MacIntyre (1985, 1993) and Pojman (1995) would doubtless argue, virtues such as care for participants, honesty etc. are clearly relevant to issues such as academic integrity, have a positive capacity to not just limit harm but also benefit society, and are worthwhile characteristics for researchers to cultivate in the context of the University community.

Running focus groups and interviews raises a number of ethical issues, and an analysis of the main ones is covered below. In the context of this project the issue of informed consent was particularly important, and as part of the research participants were given assurances about anonymity, confidentiality, and a right to withdraw from the study.

### **2.3.1 - Research undertaken in public places.**

The focus group research and interviews were not undertaken in public places, but information about them will be published, and so consideration was given to balance the parameters of academic freedom and free speech with responsibility to the community, especially (in the case of this project) with regard to religious sensitivities. A person's faith is central to their sense of self, so handling questions about faith development and the role of branding could be unsettling for some. That said, the subject of branding is arguably less contentious than other topics (such as terrorism or sexuality), although even then, it should be noted that social and economic issues that can be discomforting to participants could be exposed during the research process.

### **2.3.2 - Debriefing**

Following on from this, and using the virtues as a lens through which the University's own code can be focussed, an ethic of care suggested that participants should be debriefed following their participation, and offered opportunities to discuss elements of the research

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<sup>16</sup> The University of Derby's *Research Ethics Policy Code of Practice* can be found on the University website, presently at [http://www.derby.ac.uk/files/research\\_ethics\\_policy\\_-\\_code\\_of\\_practice2.pdf](http://www.derby.ac.uk/files/research_ethics_policy_-_code_of_practice2.pdf). Arguably, proper reflection on the two principles of *beneficence* and *non-maleficence* would lead to "respect for autonomy" and "justice" as outcomes. I accept this as implied in the University policy, although despite referencing the university's values and a resulting desire to "protect the rights, dignity, safety and privacy of research subjects, the welfare of animals and the integrity of the environment," this is implied rather than made explicit in the beginning of the document.

further if that was helpful. This involved offering participants the opportunity to discuss the research with me at a later date, and making participants aware of resources within the diocese so that participants had an opportunity to follow up any debriefing by having conversations with a priest or lay Anglican leader if that was helpful.

### **2.3.3 - Academic integrity**

The general principle of integrity should inform all research activities, and this research is no exception. Beneficence and non-maleficence indicate that honesty should be central to the relationship between researcher, participant and other interested parties. There were no sponsors for this research, although my role as an ordained minister meant that there might be parties within the church who are interested in the arguments that are put forward in the final thesis. Nevertheless, it was unlikely in this case that the research would yield results that would be controversial or that other interests would seek to influence the results (Denscombe, 2002:177). There is no major commercial angle to this research beyond sales of the brand materials themselves, it was a limited study and there is no realistic reason why anyone would want to try to influence the data being collected.

When thinking about academic integrity, I also had to consider how my role as an ordained minister influenced my positionality within the project. I was concerned that being a researcher–priest might influence the potential perception of my role within the group, or limit the freedom of people to speak in front of an “authority figure”. That said, in practice, in a “lower/middle” Anglican tradition such concerns about the authority, power and influence of the minister are perhaps less significant than they might be in some wings of the church, or indeed, within different denominations. Significantly, in the groups participants did not appear hesitant in sharing their views, and the transcripts participants certainly don’t appear to show participants worrying unduly about expressing their opinions. I was also concerned about outsider/insider status, or that participants might be wondering about my own perspective on faith brands, and shape their answers accordingly. My strategy to avoid this was through facilitating discussion through open questions without volunteering too much from my own perspective, and again, the data bears this out in the conversations that occurred within the group.

I am, of course, conscious of many factors – including being white, male, heterosexual and from a middle-class background – that will also have potentially shaped my research. I am also mindful of Stoddart's (2014:10) observation that well-meaning Christian people have blind spots, and that by definition, a blind spot is something one cannot see. Without pretending that my research is neutral or value free, I can say that during the research process I endeavoured to be as aware as I could about how my own positionality might affect both the collection and interpretation of the data, and endeavoured to submit the research to the questions asked by liberative ethics (Stoddart, 2014:144).

#### **2.3.4 - Consent and withdrawal from the investigation**

Ethically and methodologically, there was no reason why participation in this research could not be on the basis of informed consent and participants' rights of privacy were guaranteed - notwithstanding Homan's (1991:73) caveat that informed consent is "easier said than done". It can be a complicated process ensuring that participants fully understand a research project – but as far as was reasonably practicable, I aimed to ensure it in this case. Kimmel (1988) notes that the concept of informed consent is neither in practice or in law a single, clearly defined entity, but is a complex concept, whether viewed psychologically, philosophically or morally. Scientific considerations are sometimes argued to override the practical and moral reasons for totally honest and open disclosure to participants, but again, this was not applicable here<sup>17</sup>.

As Kimmel (1998:67) has pointed out, the issue of voluntary informed consent is rightly considered the norm between the researcher and research participant. The University of Derby's Guidelines (3.9-3.11) were used as framework for ensuring that this consent was properly gained in writing, and ensuring that participants' rights are respected (see Appendix B).

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<sup>17</sup> Using the principles laid down by organisations such as the British Sociological Association or the Social Research Association gives important guidelines to make judgements on a case by case basis with regard to this. A copy of these guidelines can be obtained in pdf format from <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm> The British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* can be found at [www.britisoc.org.uk/about/ethic/htm](http://www.britisoc.org.uk/about/ethic/htm)

Participants were also given the right to withdraw at any time. In focus groups this possibility was anticipated when thinking about the numbers within the group, and by ensuring before the group began that members were still happy to be part of the discussion. They were also given, in writing, the opportunity to withdraw from the study if they wished to; happily, this was not the case, however.

### **2.3.5 - Protection of participants, confidentiality and data protection**

Kimmel (1988:85) notes that privacy and confidentiality are two ethical issues crucial to social researchers who want individuals to share with them their thoughts, attitudes and experiences. The corporate nature of the focus group, and (as I argued earlier) the relatively uncontentious nature of the topic meant that this might be considered less significant in this context than in others (for example, if I were researching something related to Christian views on/experiences of cheating your expenses at work).

Nevertheless, I took seriously my ethical duty as a researcher to protect participants where I could, whilst acknowledging that by its very nature, participation in focus groups carries with it the possibility of challenge and change.

“Confidentiality and data protection” were also important in protecting participants. When transcribing data, mechanisms were used through which participants’ confidentiality and anonymity could be preserved. Westin (1968:7) defines privacy as “the claim of individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others.” One simple mechanism to facilitate this was using different names for participants when transcribing, and through observing that the storage of recordings of the sessions fell in line with University’s Code of Practice on Research Ethics. The University’s code makes it clear that collection, storage, disclosure and use of research data by researchers must comply with the Data Protection Act 1998. The research was undertaken premised upon a clear agreement regarding the use of confidential information.

### **2.3.6 - Health & Safety, and Risk Assessment.**

Section 3 of the Health & Safety at Work Act (1974) identifies responsibilities to non-employees, and by extension, this applies to students and participants in University related activities such as research. It is both the ethically responsible, and the legally required action for research to reflect upon risk and adhere to health and safety guidelines.

Risk assessment of this research highlighted two particular risks in relation to focus groups in addition to the kinds of generic risk – such as those associated with using work stations, the particular meeting space to be used, personal safety/travel etc. – that are relevant to all research.<sup>18</sup>

These two main areas of risk were that focus groups and interviews would entail participants talking about questions that could foreseeably begin a process that could have psychological, social, political, religious, cultural and economic consequences; and secondly, that data collection carries with it risks which require thoughtful control measures to be put in place.

My analysis of the risk potential for psychological, social, political, religious, environmental, cultural and economic impact on participants in my research was that it was moderate – since impact was possible, but as has already been stress, given the relatively uncontentious nature of the topic it was not likely to be detrimental to a participant's well being.

Nevertheless, a number of control measures can limited the likelihood of such an impact and also sought to moderate its impact if it did occur. The first of these was linked to the issue of informed consent that was raised earlier. Any focus group involves discussion of an issue, but the information set out in the consent forms (see Appendix B), as well as a short verbal briefing and a chance to ask question prior to the commencement of the focus group ensured that participants were clear about what they were signing up to. This enabled them to make a properly informed decision about how they felt about it, and whether it was likely to raise anything difficult for them before participating.

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<sup>18</sup> Many of these kinds of “general” risks are common to lots of other situations. So, e.g. assessments of the risk posed by the usage of Display Screen Equipment – which I am using now as I type this thesis – the control measures that can reduce and manage risk, and the regulations that govern these in a work (and by extension, research) context were drawn up by the health & Safety Executive in 1992, and can be found in Stranks (2006, p81f). There are many minor risks such as these that space will not allow in depth comment on all of them, hence my focus on what I consider in my analysis to be the main two risks associated with this research. For more on the generic risks associated with all aspects of workplaces and research activity, see Stranks (2006).

Of course, they may well feel that it is likely to be beneficial, rather than harmful for them – and as church members, they may well already participate in group discussions relating to their faith and other topics that stimulate helpful personal reflection. It is also important to stress that from the perspective of Christian theology, being challenged (rather than simply affirmed) in one's thinking can be viewed as a positive thing in many cases – it can mature an individual in their understanding of faith and lead to personal growth. What would make this focus group different from, say, a topical church study/discussion group is that this would be an additional possible outcome, rather than the purpose of the focus group, which is, of course, to generate data that is meaningful to the research.

Other control measures that helped moderate the risks included offering the opportunity for feedback and debriefing after sessions, and also providing a range of additional resources for debriefing or supporting individuals to discuss their feelings after the research. Putting these kinds of control measure in place reduced the level of risk to a tolerable level. None of the participants took up this offer, although all the participants stayed on for a short debrief immediately following the focus group session.

As far as data collection risks go, Kimmel (1988:98) observes that there are two main risks to data that is gathered in research. The risk of unauthorised use or access to sensitive data involves the possibility that identifiable information collected for research purposes might be obtained by unauthorised persons and (potentially) used against an individual. Here the problem for the researcher is how to provide physical protection of the data. The other risk is one of official misuse of data for law enforcement or other official purposes, and the problem here is how to assure respondents that the information that they provide about their behaviour will not be used for other purposes.

The data in this research is not especially controversial, and is it not commercial data. It is also highly unlikely that the kind of data gathered in this study could pose a risk to an individual or be used against them. For this reason, the data risk was assessed as moderate. Nevertheless, it has already been established that research participants have a right to privacy, and so control measures were drawn up to protect the identities of participants.

The most basic means of doing this following informed consent was to be sensitive in the focus group about asking potentially embarrassing or contentious questions. Anonymity of

participants was observed outside of the group by omitting information or adapting information (by changing names, for example).<sup>19</sup> Physically protecting the data – by taking care where and how it is stored, deleting extraneous copies, using a shredder when disposing of any papers once they have been used, taking care with memory sticks, laptops and MP3 recorders in transit (and ensuring they are password protected where possible), coding transcripts, not sharing raw data with anyone who hasn't been agreed by the group – all reduced the risks of compromising a participants privacy. Kimmel (1988:97) offers a range of practical strategies in relation to these kinds of things. For this Practical Theology research topic, that range of control measures would be enough to make the level of risk tolerable.

## **2.4 – Research validity.**

Comparative design offers a helpful way of ensuring the “trustworthiness” of research. Swinton & Mowat’s research into the role of chaplaincy in the NHS provides a helpful example of this – multiple case studies of chaplaincy were compared, with semi-structured interviews with the same 44 NHS chaplains undertaken either side of the case study process (2006:156-191). In this smaller scale study, my intention was to increase reliability through *triangulating* the data generated in the focus group in a similar way - with interviews with experts, and also through documentary analysis. In this case, the documentary analysis involved studying Alpha materials – copies of Alpha’s newsletter - to see what Alpha themselves say about participants’ experiences, and seeing if these matched the themes that had emerged from the focus group. Manning & Cullum-Swann (in Denzin & Lincoln (ed.) 1994:463-476) have covered this kind of documentary analysis in detail. This approach, guided by their work, was a fairly basic content analysis, considered appropriate given the size of this project and the fact that document analysis was being used primarily for triangulation rather than as the main source of data (1994:464).

The one-to-one interviews with “experts in the field” used two local ministers, a bishop and a marketing professional. As the results will show, this provided important corroborative

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<sup>19</sup> Obviously there is a chance that members of church communities reading the research might try to guess if they know the identity of particular participants – but even then, confirming or denying that would be in the hands of the participant themselves if they were ever asked about it. Complex microaggregation methods, like those pioneered by Feige & Watts (cited in Kimmel, 1988) are not practical in this kind of research, but basic identity changes and confidentiality sufficed.

data to show that the findings of the focus group were valid. Creswell (2009:217) argues that this kind of mixed method approach is helpful both in terms of validity and also analysis.

## **2.5 - Analysing and presenting the data**

Kimmel (1988:97) offers a range of practical strategies that can help accurate and confidential transcription and storage of data.<sup>20</sup>

Bryman & Bell (2003:424) note that general approaches to analysing qualitative data have been well developed. There are many ways of doing so, although no one method has achieved a monopoly over the others (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Ryan & Bertrand, 2000). Dey (1995:266) stresses the “interdependence and mutual enhancement of apparently opposing approaches” to analysing data. Broadly speaking, as Bryman (2016) and Bryman & Bell (2003) argue, there are four main approaches: analytic induction (Bryman, 2016:571), grounded theory (Bryman, 2016:572-580), thematic analysis (Bryman, 2016: 584-589), or narrative analysis (Bryman, 2016: 590-593) although others do exist (see, e.g., Williams, 1976; Hycner, 1985).

Bryman & Bell (2003:426) note that analytic induction begins with a research question, proceeds to a hypothetical explanation of that question, and then continues on to the collection of the data. If a case that is inconsistent with the hypothesis is encountered, the analyst either redefines the hypothesis to exclude the negative case, or reformulates the hypothesis and proceeds with further data collection. In its favour, analytic induction can be rigorous, since a single case that is inconsistent with its hypothesis is sufficient to necessitate further data collection or a reformulation of the thesis.

Against analytic induction, whilst it can establish the *sufficient* conditions for phenomena occurring, it says nothing about what conditions are *necessary*; and it does not provide useful guidelines as to how many cases need to be investigated before the absence of negative cases (and therefore the validity of the original hypothesis) can be confirmed. Moreover, its relation to verification and scientific method certainly leads me to suspicions about a faint whiff of positivism – and whilst there is nothing about analytic induction that is *necessarily* at odds with Practical Theology, from a personal perspective, my research philosophy fits

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<sup>20</sup> Again, reflection on this formed part of my Ethics assignment, so I do not propose to cover it any more fully here.



more comfortably with a method that is more inductive in its approach – albeit that the nature of the MRes research journey mitigates against a fully inductive approach, as theory began to be generated after the first tranche of data collection and analysis.

Turning to grounded theory, Strauss & Corbin (1998:12) define it as

theory that (is) derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.

Whilst noting that there is controversy about the nature of grounded theory, Bryman & Bell (2003:428f) present the main facets of grounded theory in terms of the “tools” which enable analysis to take place - theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical saturation and constant comparison. In these respects, grounded theory offers some helpful tools, but in reality, as a set of procedures I found it too prescriptive as a method.

Critics of grounded theory also question whether researchers really can suspend their awareness of theories and concepts until they have analysed their data (Bulmer:1979). In this study, the data generation and analysis were undertaken using an interrelated process – because although qualitative research is “end-loaded” (Cohen , Manion, & Morrison: 2000), in that categories emerge from the data as in a grounded theory approach, this does not mean that the fieldwork must be completed before the researcher can make any sense of the data. In fact, because of the need for both reflexivity and flexibility in this kind of research, a number of practitioners emphasise the need for qualitative researchers engage in data collection and analysis at the same time (see, e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richardson, 2000). Coffey and Atkinson (1996:2) contend that “letting data accumulate without preliminary analysis along the way is a recipe for unhappiness, if not total disaster.” Contemporaneous data generation and analysis is also seen in Miles & Huberman’s approach in which their three central processes of data reduction, display and verification are all woven together so that the analytic procedure is “a continuous, iterative enterprise.” (1994:23). In this study, in the selection of the second two focus groups is an example of this kind of interweaving, although it should be noted that although this decision was deliberate, it was also in part influenced by the nature of the MRes/new route PhD research journey described earlier, in which a smaller pilot project incorporating the first three focus groups was initiated first as part of the MRes, and the second part of the data

collection followed on from the reflection and analysis that had already taken place at that stage.<sup>21</sup>

Rounding off their critique of grounded theory, Bryman & Bell (2003) also note that utilising it is extremely time-consuming. It can be open to the charge of being vague if insufficient rigour is demonstrated in the method adopted, and some critics argue that it can have a tendency to fragment data rather than present it as a whole.

Notwithstanding the criticisms noted above however, it should be said that grounded theory does have some strengths. These include its ability to capture complexity, link with praxis, and enable the kind of hermeneutical listening to narratives and meaning that is fundamental to good social research, and certainly, to Practical Theology. However, as a set of processes and outcomes it felt too prescriptive for the particular MRes/new route PhD process I had embarked upon. As Bryman and Bell (2003:585) note, grounded theory is often honoured more in the breach than the observance.

Narrative analysis is an approach to data analysis that is sensitive to the way in which people, as providers of accounts, make sense of what is happening. Such stories are always told with a purpose in mind – there is an intended effect (Bryman, 2016:589). People often view their lives in terms of continuity and process, and narrative researchers might argue that in contrast to narrative analysis, some approaches to the collection and analysis of data might not sufficiently recognise that (Bryman, 2016:590). There are criticisms of narrative analysis, however. Bury (2001), has questioned whether researchers in illness narratives have been too uncritical in their treatment of the narratives they are told, and Bryman (2016), Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes (2010) and Riessman (2008) have observed that narrative analysis has splintered into a number of different approaches, and researchers need to ensure they are clear what kind of narrative analysis they are conducting. However, narrative analysis would have strengths to offer research in Practical Theology – not least in capturing the story of people as they are describing their journey of faith. For the purposes of this research, however, the decision was taken that narrative analysis might be more suited to individual interviews rather than focus group situations, and might unnecessarily limit the kind of research questions that could be posed in that context – although I am aware there are examples of narrative analysis that do apply it to contexts other than

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<sup>21</sup> See note 9 of this chapter for more on this.

individual interviews, such as Davis' (2008) analysis of documents concerning breast cancer. Nevertheless, although narrative analysis offers some helpful insights, as a focal methodology it was deemed too limiting for this study.

The emerging approach of thematic analysis, in contrast, offered a flexible and yet rigorous enough framework to enable a coherent framework for qualitative analysis in this project. As Bryman (2016:584) notes with caution that it is perhaps a little underdeveloped and difficult to identify exactly as an approach, and does not offer specific steps as a method, but he also observes that there is increasing agreement of how it works as a procedure (see, e.g., Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Braun and Clarke, 2006), and thematic analysis has become increasingly common in qualitative research. Bazeley (2013) in particular is cautious about thematic analysis, out of a concern that researchers are vague about how themes have “emerged” from the data – arguing that it is not enough just to identify themes, but that thematic researchers need to justify why and on what basis those themes are significant. Bryman (2016:584) provides a helpful clarification in this regard when he identifies a “theme” as a category identified by the analyst through his or her data that relates to his or her research focus/questions. Such a theme builds on codes identified in transcripts and field notes, and provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can then make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus.

My research process began with a research question about whether faith brands were problematic or beneficial to Christian faith. Data was collected, and coding was used as a means of processing data, labelling, separating, compiling and organising it in a way that kept the data active in the first stages of generating theory (Charmaz, 1983:186). In this project I did this manually rather than by using software such as *NVivo*. As Bryman & Bell (2003:444-461) note, computer-assisted data analysis, possibly comes into its own when there are larger amounts of data to be analysed. The question of when saturation has been reached is a complex one (Bryman, 2016:417), but certainly comparing the data in my groups and the coded themes that emerged appeared to suggest that they cohered with each other. However, I would accept that a wider study might examine groups from churches in other parts of the country or go beyond Anglicanism, to name but two variables.

Coding data also helped aid recall and analysis, and identify key themes that were emerging to generate theory. In the case of this project, certain key themes emerged fairly quickly, and data from the focus groups, one-to-one interviews and a fairly rudimentary documentary analysis – looking at basic themes that emerged (such as the importance of relationships with other Christians in participants' faith development, or the notion of faith as a journey) could be grouped under headings and triangulated. However, because of this, and because the research very definitely took place in two distinct stages, although the research started out as inductive in approach, it felt inevitable that a hypothesis began to emerge part way through.

Presenting this data is not straightforward – once again, there are no strict rules and conventions – but there is plenty of general guidance available (see, e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Blaxter et al, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994 (2000); Bryman & Bell, 2003). For me, as clear themes emerged from the data the theory was generated and reflected upon in dialogue. The study objective, which was to assess the impact of brands on the faith development of some members of East Midlands Churches, when considered together with the research philosophy and research strategy, suggested to me that a thematic presentation of the findings would be most appropriate.

When it came to presenting the data, again, although there is no prescriptive method, rules or conventions, there is general guidance available (see, e.g. Bryman & Bell, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Blaxter et al, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As theory was generated, the study objectives, research philosophy & research strategy acted as a guide, and I opted to use the research interview structure from the focus groups as a guide to present the data, linking themes as they emerged. Given that my focus group strategy incorporated an element of compare and contrast, when looking at each theme I have tended to present the data thematically, but highlighted the differences of opinion and theological understanding between the groups where they exist.

In the first round of analysis I also split the data as neatly as I could between data that offered insights into how faith brands had affected the faith journeys of individuals (Chapter 3), and data that raised issues about the relation between faith brands and the wider Church (Chapter 4) before going on to examine different strands of thought in more depth in the chapters that follow. In these chapters I also used Rational Choice Theory (RCT) in

dialogue with the data as I analysed it – using the theory to interrogate the data and the data to interrogate the theory. Rational Choice Theory seemed an appropriate starting point to aid my analysis – if brands are a means of enabling choice a theory about how people make their religious choices ought to be an interesting dialogue partner.

To this end, before we examine the data we will briefly reflect on Rational Choice Theory and how it might both enable us to reflect on the data that emerges from this study, and how the data from this study might enable us to reflect on the validity (or otherwise) of Rational Choice Theory.

## **2.6 – Rational Choice Theory – a short but critical introduction**

As Lechner (2007:81) observes, the foundation of rational choice theory (RCT) goes back to the writings of Adam Smith (1776 (1976)). Smith's treatment of religion as an ordinary activity amenable to human analysis became a hallmark of the sociology of religion attributed to Weber and Durkheim, and the discourse of rational choice used by present-day scholars claims a close kinship not just with his approach but also with the substance of his arguments. Effectively, rational choice theorists argue that religious activity is inherently rational, and that people essentially utilise a kind of cost-benefit analysis when reflecting upon whether to choose a church, take on a religious commitment or accept a religious belief. The "demand" for religion is met by "supply" produced by religious organisations, and the activities of religious consumers and producers constitute a market or "religious economy".

Drawing upon Becker's (1976:5) characterisation of the rational choice approach, Iannaccone (1997:26) argues that treating religion as a rational activity involves three assumptions:

Assumption 1: Individuals act rationally, weighing the costs and benefits of potential actions, and choosing those actions that maximise the net benefits.

Assumption 2: The ultimate preferences (or "needs") that individuals use to assess costs and benefits tend not to vary much from person to person or over time.

Assumption 3: Social outcomes constitute the equilibria that emerge from the aggregation and interaction of individual actions.

Of these assumptions, maximising behaviour is fundamental; but Iannaccone (1997) also places significant emphasis on people's changing circumstances. Over time, people modify their religious choices in significant ways, and Iannaccone seeks to model behaviour changes as optimal responses to changing circumstances – on both the side of religious market, both “consumers” and “producers” (1997:27). So, for example, Iannaccone finds that those who place a high value on their time are more likely to substitute monetary contributions for their church attendance (1997:30f). Furthermore, he argues that individuals retain religious knowledge as a form of “human capital”, and that RCT makes sense of the way that people who tend to switch denominations tend to switch to similar ones, because this preserves their previous religious investments (1997:33). He also posits that religious activity is often collective because collective production reduces the risk associated with religious activity, whose supernatural benefits no individuals can fully assess (1997:33f).

RCT has much to commend it; there seems little doubt that people do weigh costs and benefits in deciding on the right course of action in many instances, and it is reasonable to make the assumption that religion is similar to other forms of social conduct. Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings with the way Iannaccone (1997) articulates RCT in relation to religion. Spickard (1998) argues that Iannaccone pays insufficient attention to psychological evidence on the complexity of actual decision making, and that as a universal assumption it becomes implausible. Lechner (2007) with Bryant (2000) argues that few spiritual seekers approach their decision as a “standard consumer choice problem”; many engage in religious actions as a form of expression rather than in search of benefits, and that people's relation to the divine make it difficult for them to think of their faith as simply another commodity. The sacred is in some ways very different to the profane. Hechter (1997) builds on this, arguing that religious behaviour may not be instrumental, but rather, a way of enacting “immanent” values.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985 and 1987) and Starke and Finke (2000) try to address these weaknesses by offering what Lechner (2007:83) describes as a “thicker” or more sociological version of RCT – relaxing some of Iannaccone & Becker's assumptions (Stark

and Finke, 2000:36, 84) whilst also attributing a wider range of inclinations to individuals. They start with the proposition that

within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices (Starke and Finke, 2000:85).

In this view, humans will tend to formulate and accept explanations for obtaining rewards in the distant future - in Stark and Finke's words, an "unverifiable context" (2000:85).

Christian religious explanations are distinctive in that they describe ways of obtaining rewards of an immense value that are nevertheless postponed until another, otherworldly context.

Hechter (1997:152) argues that Stark and Bainbridge (1985) introduce concepts such as "compensators" in order to continue arguing from a position of instrumental logic. This may be so, but the notion of deferred rewards is central to their thesis in explaining how religion works and why, contrary to proponents of secularisation, religion retains an appeal to people as "the only plausible source of certain rewards for which there is a general and inexhaustible demand" (Starke and Finke, 2000:85).

There are problems with the argument of Stark, Bainbridge and Finke, however. With Lechner (2007), it seems to me that they have been extremely bold in ascribing to all human beings a desire for otherworldly rewards – atheists would dispute that claim immediately, and it does little to explain why some human beings remain agnostic. Their explanations make clear how believers might gain or receive certain rewards with their scheme, but it is not clear why this should necessarily lead to faith. Believers would take issue with this account too, since the worship or submission to the divine inherent to many religions is not captured wholly in terms of "exchange"; few believers actually seem to seek a beneficial exchange, trading in one faith for another if it offers a better deal. Faith branding may seek to present faith in positive terms, but it is questionable whether religious organisations have lowered the "price" of exchange specified in their doctrine in order to attract new "customers". That said, as we shall see in the following chapters, there are debates around presenting/simplifying faith around which RCT may contribute to some helpful dialogue, and some of the debates around Fresh Expressions methodology – particularly around "inculturation" - also link in to these kinds of questions and theological debate.

Stark & Bainbridge (1987) also argue that the religious movements that offer the most convincing promises of eternal life consequently win the greatest amount of adherents; however, as Furseth & Repstad (2006:118) argue, the notion that individuals design their religiosity based on the rewards they gain could also be used to argue against the idea that whoever promises the most appeals the most. If rational action is to reach a goal with minimum cost, one could argue that individuals will tend to live a decent and good life without much religious involvement, because they assume that God will accept them as they are and not ask much more of them. RCT does not address the issue of theological truth, nor does it deal in sufficient detail with the varying conceptualisations of what the afterlife might represent in terms of compensators. Although there are some interesting debates to be had about the relative appeal of stricter and more liberal church organisations (see, e.g., Kelley, 1978) – some of which may be very helpful in our later analysis of focus group data - it is not clear how their scheme works when you step outside a broadly Judeo-Christian framework and consider the understanding of what happens post-death in Buddhism, for example. Sharot (2002:450) has also highlighted weaknesses in relation to RCT's "overly American" and overly Western/Christian approach to understanding faith. As Hamilton (2001:188) observes,

To say that people seek a purpose in life or the purpose of life may imply no more than that they seek meaning in it and in doing so they may well arrive at conclusions which do not suppose the existence of some supernatural realm, divinity or principle. Some religious traditions, notably Buddhism, do not place the supernatural at the centre of their systems. It is debateable whether conceptions of the supernatural are part of orthodox Buddhism at all.

There are further criticisms of RCT; In the context of the UK, Gill (1993, 1999) and Bruce (1999) have (from differing perspectives) critiqued aspects of RCT (namely, that an increase in religious supply generates an increase in religious demand) by questioning how the propositions set out by Stark & Bainbridge (1987) relate to the data on the ground. In the end, RCT seems too big and too totalising to be fully accepted, and detailed examination of the data in this study appears to bear this out.

In addition, and with respect to gender, whilst it is true that Miller and Stark (2002) attempt to tackle the significance of gender in religious decision making, Neitz and Muser (1996)



argue that at a conceptual level the RCT model struggles to fit a whole set of questions that relate to the religious lives of women – such relationality, connectedness, reproduction, negotiation, interpretation, narrative – into its frame. Ammerman (1996) also argues that for both genders, theorists need to take into account the role of emotion as well as reason – although she sees this as both/and not either/or. RCT, in Ammerman's account, offer helpful explanatory potential, but does not go the whole way.

In many respects, this appears a helpful middle way to take – RCT offers valuable insights into how people choose, but it is not the whole story. As Davie (2007 (2013):87f) argues, neither the advocates of secularisation nor the protagonists of RCT have conclusively nailed a complete theory of religion; but there is some truth in both (as she argues with respect to, for example, some of the connections between choice and religion suggested by RCT and the way in which the historic European churches have declined in their ability to discipline the behaviour and belief systems of most Europeans). Religions in Europe remain an important marker of identity and allegiance for different people, and continue to function as significant public utilities – as outlined in Davie's concept of "vicarious religion" (2000, 2006). At the same time, Davie (2007) observes that a culture of choice is beginning to emerge which is distinctive to the European case; and this shift from obligation to consumption embodies elements of both the secularisation and the RCT approaches to religion.

In the light of this, whilst RCT is problematic, the general insights of RCT, and the question of how people make their choices remain a helpful tool for this study to dialogue with – in particular, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) and Stark and Finke's (2000) more sociological approach. It is unlikely to offer a complete framework of how to understand the religious behaviour of our focus group participants, but will provide a helpful additional theoretical background for reflection by working as a critical and heuristic lens through which the data can be viewed. As we tackle the question of whether faith brands are problematic or beneficial to Christian faith in our study of Christians from some East Midlands churches the questions raised by the data will also, in turn, offer some insights into the validity of RCT and some of the questions raised above, before we begin to reflect theologically upon them later in the thesis. The data will do this by highlighting part of the range of factors which

play a role in people's actual religious decision making, and demonstrating in practise the complexity of such choices. It is to this data we now turn.



### **3. Research & critical analysis (I) – faith brands and individual faith journeys.**

#### **3.1 – Alpha, New Wine, Spring Harvest and Soul Survivor – a brief introduction**

Some of the more significant Christian faith brands that emerged from the data in our focus groups were the Alpha course, New Wine, Spring Harvest and (to a lesser extent) Soul Survivor.<sup>22</sup> Before analysing the research findings, let us look briefly at them to inform the study.

##### **3.1.1 - Alpha**

Alpha is a series of fifteen sessions exploring aspects of the Christian faith, usually over a period of time with a day or weekend away as an integral part of the course. Alpha has evolved over time from a course designed to follow up and encourage new Christians, into a course which also aims to encourage non-church goers to consider the claims of Christianity for themselves (Ireland, 2005:13).

The structure of a typical Alpha night tends to revolve around gathering and welcoming people, usually around a meal, listening to a talk, and then breaking into small groups (which retain the same composition for the duration of the course, to allow members to get to know and trust one another) to discuss the content of the talk. The fifteen talks follow the material in the book *Questions of Life*, by Nicky Gumbel (1993 [2008]). There is some limited scope for local variation, although the creators of Alpha are keen to stress that “if you change the course content too much, it is no longer Alpha”.<sup>23</sup>

##### **3.1.2 – New Wine**

New Wine is a para-church movement that sees itself as a network of “local churches working together with one vision: to see the nation changed.” (<http://www.new-wine.org/>, [online])

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<sup>22</sup> This thesis limited its in depth consideration of Christian faith brands to the ones which emerged from the focus groups themselves. This was a pity in relation to one or two emerging faith brands I would have been interested in reflecting upon – I would have found it fascinating to have explored Messy Church, or Pilgrim more, to name but two – but doing so was not possible given my research approach/philosophy.

<sup>23</sup> Conversation between the author and The Revd. Sandy Miller, at the time Rector of Holy Trinity Brompton, where Alpha originates and is administered from. Ireland (2005:20f) talks further about the issues of copyright that those who wish to adapt the course have run into; in section 3 we will briefly examine one of the issues this raises. Adaptation and local variation is a key issue when franchising any brand.

New Wine's website make it clear that their foundations come from an Anglican church in the 1980s, St Andrew's, Chorleywood, whose vicar, David Pytches had a longing to see "the spontaneous expansion" of the church in this country as he had seen it happening in Chile, while Bishop there. Through a growing friendship with John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Church in the USA, Pytches came to believe that one of the keys was the equipping of ordinary Christians for ministry through the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit.

Wimber visited St Andrew's, and held various public conferences which stirred up great interest from churches across England. Pytches began a series of one-day conferences in St Andrew's for church leaders, and in 1987/8 residential mid-week conferences at Swanwick. As interest increased, St Andrew's was seen as an example of good practice as a local church transformed by the Holy Spirit and engaging in effective mission in a contemporary way. These conferences grew into New Wine's first summer conference, attended by about 2,400 people at the Royal Bath & West Showground in 1989.

The name 'New Wine' was chosen to reflect the movement's charismatic evangelical theology - as a good biblical description of the new life in the Spirit being offered. One might say it was a good brand shorthand for the theology of the movement.

Leaders brought their church families to attend the conference for a week; a full programme of worship, Bible teaching, seminars, and entertainment was offered to adults, youth and children alike. Each year more churches brought more people and by 1993 the youth work had grown so much under Mike Pilavachi's leadership that it became a separate movement and brand: Soul Survivor.

In 1998 the Church Leaders Network was formed to gather leaders into local network groups so that they could receive mutual personal support, leadership training, and encouragement in the ministry of the Spirit throughout the year. An annual national leaders' conference was started in 1999 and through identifying with others with the same vision and values a 'family' of churches has developed which transcends denominational differences – a significant development, which shifted New Wine from being a movement largely within the Anglican church to a movement which has clear Anglican roots, but is now impacting other denominations and church streams beyond Anglicanism. Churches may well sometimes feel they have as much or even more in common with a "New Wine" church of another

denomination than they might do with another church of their own denomination just down the road.<sup>24</sup>

The growth of New Wine's summer conferences has accelerated in recent years, which they argue is in part because of the formation of this leader's network. This seems entirely plausible, given that church leaders who are attracted by New Wine's offer of support and resourcing will, if they are sufficiently impressed with the quality of what is on offer, then bring their churches and suggest their ministry friends also join the network.

Two final developments have been the widening of the leadership team, and the growth of an international ministry. When Pytches retired from Chorleywood in 1996 he asked a number of church leaders who had established New Wine values in their churches to join him in a leadership team. They and their churches are now the driving force behind New Wine. During the 1990s many leaders from abroad also attended New Wine leaders' retreats in the UK and as a result given a similar vision for their own countries. New Wine International was launched in 1995 and has been expanding ever since. As New Wine's website says, "activities extend far beyond the borders of England, and have spread not only to Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but to ten other countries across four continents".

### **3.1.3 – *Spring Harvest and Soul Survivor***

Spring Harvest and Soul Survivor are, like New Wine, also Christian conferences that are charismatic/evangelical in ethos, with a selection of linked gatherings. Neither purport to be a movement resourcing and connecting mission across local churches in quite the same way that New Wine does, nor are they as explicitly linked with Anglicanism as a denomination (despite Soul Survivor having clear Anglican roots, having grown out of the New Wine network).

Spring Harvest began life as a one week event in Prestatyn in Wales, in 1979. In over 30 years, it has grown into a multi-resort event every Easter, as well as other conferences run under the Spring Harvest umbrella at other times of year (e.g. for youth workers or other

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<sup>24</sup> Which of course, raises the , discussed later in this thesis, of how far existing historic denominations can also be described as "brands", even if they have not emerged during the age of modern branding. Does their later emergence mean that they have less "power" to engage and hold than some of the newer, "branded" churches? It would be fascinating, but beyond the remit of this thesis, to consider how this relates to the Orthodox Churches and the way they have retained loyalty in often inhospitable minority environments over millennia (cf. sometimes used phrase: "the Anglican Church deals in decades, the Roman Catholic Church in centuries, and the Orthodox in millennia").

ministry specialisms). Spring Harvest also have a holiday park in the west of France. (<http://www.springharvest.org/>, [online])

Soul Survivor describe itself as “a Christian organisation who put on a range of events to help young people, youth leaders, and those in their 20s and 30s, develop and deepen their relationship with Jesus.” Soul Survivor began in 1993 and was started by Mike Pilavachi, who was the youth worker at St Andrew’s Chorleywood under the leadership of Bishop David Pytches. As the youth work grew at the New Wine events, Mike became keen to start a new event that would be aimed purely at teenagers and in 1993 began the first conference hosting just under 2,000 young people. The events have grown each year since then, branching out into more than one week, and beginning to cater for slightly more specialised age ranges as well as becoming more outward in focus (through, for example, Soul in the City and Soul Action). (<http://soulsurvivor.com//>, [online])

### ***3.2 – brands and faith development: participants’ views on the most significant factors. Relationships, and the faith “journey.”***

Having familiarised ourselves with the main Christian faith brands that are under consideration in this thesis, we will now examine some of the more pertinent themes that emerged from our focus group discussions in relation to how participants perceived they had impacted the development of their faith.

#### ***3.2.1 – Relationships and the faith “journey” – first reflections***

The most obvious aspect to emerge from the first three focus groups was that it was relationships with others that were the most important single aspect in people’s faith development. The first question that participants in the focus groups were asked to reflect on was the story of how their faith had developed, and what in their opinion have been the most significant elements in that faith development.

As they did this, participants talked again and again about people they knew who had helped, encouraged or challenged them on their faith journey.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes these were individuals whose quality of life has impressed them. Sometimes it was connected to the environment in which they grew up, parents and grandparents. Other participants remarked that they had been challenged to reflect on faith when noticing a change in someone close who has come to or grown in their faith.

*Andrea: People – certain people...I would say the youth group when I was at (n) Baptist Church...I think it was the influence of the young people there, slightly older than me.*

*Albert: It was definitely relationships...as far as I go...it was definitely a couple of individuals, who started [sic] - I can see now started the process, I couldn't necessarily see that then.*

*Anne: Yes, I'd echo that, certainly from way back, it was one person in particular who started things off...*

*Bernadette: People I have met...er...two people in particular at a time when I was doubting that I had any faith at all...*

*Brian: Suddenly (Bernadette) came to an in depth faith and I wanted to have what I discovered she'd got...*

Some participants had been impacted by individuals who had roles in teaching and preaching in the church – such as Celia, who remarked,

*I think for me it has probably been [the] influence of people, some of them being ministers, some of them not, but I think particularly, sort of listening to teaching and explanations and then sort of thinking about things that have triggered further explanations and further contemplation of things in my mind.*

Without contradicting this emphasis on the importance of relationships with significant others, Camilla and Celia suggested that in their life story the change in pace that having

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<sup>25</sup> The groups did not mention close relationships that alienated them, but as we will see, several participants did mention alienating encounters with Christians they knew less well at Alpha courses or New Wine. However, perhaps because of the greater relational distance the participants seemed able to integrate potentially alienating things within an overall trajectory that stuck with the faith.



children created for them when they left work or were suddenly getting engaged in different community events was also significant.

*Camilla: I think for me it was when I found I'd actually got time. I was always very busy and you just kind of just give God a nod on a Sunday if you're not careful and when I was forced to give up work twenty-odd years ago I actually found I had time to sit and think and pray more.*

So for participants, relationships with Christians who had a positive impact upon them were a key part of their positive faith development – and not necessarily just one individual, but in many cases, a sequence of people who made a difference at different life stages. On one level, this may appear to be stating the obvious. But it is helpful to note that what emerged from the focus groups supports the work of Finney (1992) in relation to evangelism, which demonstrated that conversion is more commonly an extended process rather than a one-off event, and highlighted the importance of relationships within that process.

In addition, the experiences of the participants support the idea of a “journey” model of faith development. This does not only aid our understanding of how people grow in their faith now. Booker & Ireland (2003:5) suggest this enriches our understanding of Biblical conversion stories in the New Testament. It is true that some, such as the Philippian jailer embracing faith following the earthquake, seem to have converted “on the spot” so to speak, in a time of crisis decision (Acts 16:11-40). Looking at other similar sudden conversions, however, such as those of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) or the Ethiopian eunuch who converts after a conversation with Philip (Acts 8:26-40) reveals more of a journey than might be evident at first glance. A re-reading of their stories in the light of this research might consider that Saul had been interacting for some time before his conversion with the witness of the persecuted church, particularly through his involvement in Stephen’s death (Acts 6:8-8:1) and the Ethiopian is a man who had come to Jerusalem to worship, and had been reading the Hebrew scriptures and seeking to understand them for some time before Philip began to talk with him about Isaiah and the life and ministry of Jesus.

Even looking at Peter the Apostle, one sees a gradual movement and a maturing of faith that occupies the whole of Jesus’ public ministry. One solitary “conversion moment” where

Peter grasps the faith in its entirety cannot clearly be identified, although there are clearly epiphanies and significant steps on the way – Peter’s response to Christ’s first call (Mk 1:16-18), and his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah amongst the villages of Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27-29) could be cited, but these are followed by his desertion of Christ (Mk 14:66-72), before his affirmation of the risen Lord (cf. Jn 21:15-19). His faith develops over time – which resonates well with the idea of disciples being followers and learners.

Cilla’s story highlights the gradual nature of the faith journeys of participants. Her faith developed over a number of years and was connected to particular life stages – particularly connected to the location where she lived, and especially through having children and having a desire to bring them up connected to a church. Relationships played an important part in this – a vicar who engaged with them after the birth of her first child, and the fact that having then moved again they found themselves in a community where “everything revolved around the church.” By that, Cilla referred to children’s activities such as the toddler group, where as a young mum who was new to the area she had gone hoping to make relationships with people.

In Cilla’s story there was no clear “point of conversion”, but stages on the way similar to the Biblical faith journeys described above. In fact, there were points on her faith journey where she felt quite unsure of her experiences – such as her visit to a Billy Graham rally in the 1980s.

*Cilla: It would be about ’82, ’83..*

*Celia: She’s a child... (group laughter)*

*Cilla: (laughs) Yeah...And er...oh it was aw - I hated it, it was awful...really was awful...you wanna come forward, and Jesus in your life – nooo, I’m not coming forward!*

*Celia: Get me out of here! (group laughter)*

*Cilla: It was really, really horrible...Cos I honestly thought, I really did think that going there – might – ‘cos I’d always believed in God, gone to church as a youngster, the seed was in there but...I thought, well, perhaps this will help but ohhh, no, it was horrible...*

*CH: What was it you didn’t like?*

*Cilla: I think it was the Americanism of it all um...it was this “come forward and all your sins will be forgiven and everything will be okay...” and ooohhh...no, it really – (whispered) not my thing...didn’t like it at all...*

Even then, however, with reflection the rally was not a purely negative experience on Cilla’s faith journey. There was something unique about the atmosphere which made her stop and think and she remembers to this day:

*Cilla: But I have to say what really, um, what really did s-s-strike me was that, um, there must have been, there was a small stage on the pitch, and, I mean, we’d gone to football matches there, because it is a football ground, and having been used to sort of like, 20 odd thousand people there, and sometimes 30,000, and the noise, it was just the silence, ‘cos they’d crammed, they must have had upwards of 30 or 40,000 people there and it was so quiet, so so quiet, everybody was just listening, and it was almost like a peaceful hush, and it was so peaceful, the, the crowd were very peaceful, it was an incredible experience...*

This adds further weight to studies such as Kirk (1999) which highlight the difference between “conversion” and “regeneration”, as well as Booker & Ireland’s (2003) conviction that the idea of a neat church/non-church (or committed/uncommitted) divide can be a false distinction and that the process of believing/belonging is fuzzier and more gradual than we might like it to be sometimes for the purposes of a neat research project.<sup>26</sup> Cilla and others clearly had positive and negative moments on their faith journeys, and consistently spoke of how the significant growth occurred in relationship to others who were part of the community of faith.

It would be interesting to compare the stories emerging from the focus groups people who had rejected church or Christian faith and reflect on how relationships had played a part within their decision making. One suspects that these groups would be harder to convene. Church leavers, unlike church attenders, cannot be approached as a community so easily. Richter & Francis (1998) have attempted one such study, although their methodology was to

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<sup>26</sup> Kirk (1999:68) contrast the two by arguing that the confusion between conversion and regeneration often arises from the mistaken view that an outward decision to accept Christ is the sole goal of evangelism. “Such a view, however, confuses conversion with regeneration, human activity with God’s activity. Regeneration is certainly a single event in which God brings to birth a new nature within the person who trusts Jesus Christ for salvation. Conversion, however, has both a beginning and many repetitions.” For more on believing/belonging, see Davie (1994, 2000, 2006, 2007).

use questionnaires and one-to-one interviews. What emerged from this, analogous to what emerged from my own study, was that bad relationships certainly contributed to people leaving church, as did changes in life circumstance or location. Relationships do not figure quite so dominantly, although they are significant among the general reasons why people undergo what they term “deconversion”.

Two other observations need to be made about the topic of faith journeys and conversion before we move into questions more specific to faith brands. One is that in this study, the first three focus groups were made up of participants who were all over 50 years of age. This is significant because studies of both conversion and deconversion suggest that younger people tend more towards a sudden change either way (see, e.g. Richter & Francis, 1998:26). Secondly, the first three focus groups were also drawn from an Anglican church in the midlands whose parish profile suggests it is central in churchmanship and theology, and would not consider itself “evangelical”, even if some church members would. However, it was drawn to my attention that the members grouped in Group B self-identified as more “charismatic evangelical” than those in Groups A and C.

I was interested in discovering whether focus groups drawn from a more self-consciously “evangelical” constituency might yield slightly differing results, given the tendency within evangelical theology to place more emphasis on conversion and individual commitment than other traditions (see, e.g., McGrath, 1997:331). After reviewing the initial data, it seemed as if there might be some differences in perception. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a slightly higher emphasis on a “conversion moment” was found – as in the experiences of Bernadette and Brian, earlier. So in the second phase of data collection, the decision to see if it might be possible to run focus groups drawn from more “evangelical” parishes continued this element of compare and contrast. However, it is fair to say that despite a slightly sharper emphasis on a particular defining moment of commitment, faith was still nevertheless seen in terms of a journey or process. Although this is not a huge study, I felt it was important to enable an element of comparison between participants of differing traditions in order to see if this held true for them.

### **3.2.2 – Relationships and the faith “journey” – further reflections, introducing groups D and E.**

With all that in mind, the two additional focus groups were selected from Anglican churches in the East Midlands who would present themselves much more consciously as evangelical. Group D was comprised of people in their 40s/early 50s from a church best described as central Anglican/evangelical and Group E comprised people in their 20s/30s from a church which would be described as Anglican charismatic/evangelical.

The first and most obvious thing about the data that emerged from these second two focus groups is that, as with Groups A, B and C the importance of relationships continued to be the most significant aspect within the groups – often beginning with family.

*Ed: My faith started with being part of a Christian family...*

*Denzil: I came to faith erm, through...I suppose, indirectly, because my parents were Christians, erm, and so they had a very positive influence. I had positive influences from church as a young child...*

For many in groups D and E, however, the role of relationships was much more closely linked to life events and the active efforts of churches to provide opportunities to explore faith. In Group D, where many of the members had come to faith in adult life, friendships and relationships had paved the way for encounter and follow up involvement in Christian exploration:

*Darren: It was then that (friend's name) came to me and kind of like invited me back into the church, and asked me to play cricket and, and that sort of stuff, and then I got invited to do the George Chapel and convert that... so I was, I was still thinking nothing, it wasn't for me, but really low, and I was working in the church every day for about 4 months, and was about a month or so into it and um, it's weird being in the church and that, on your own for so long every day, and erm, I just used to sit at the back of the George Chapel and have me dinner, and one day I just, just couldn't take any more, I was just sat there and just in tears just thinking there must be something better than this, what have I got to do to be happy I suppose, and it was kind of then really I had a*

*bit of a moment, I said, right, I just can't do it on me own anymore I just need some guidance I just want to be happy, I just need something, and it, it's kind of then I just said yeah, I'll go with it...and as the George chapel finished the Alpha course started and I just kind of like threw myself into that and erm, it seems every day since I made that commitment I just got happier and happier and things got easier and easier and it's just like I was making the right choices for a change instead of the wrong choices I suppose...*

Alongside this emphasis on relationships, the notion of the journey and the gradual progression of faith was also very apparent in Groups D and E:

*Ed: I would argue my Christian journey came through, erm, knowing other Christians, growing up with other Christians, knowing, I felt like I knew all the stories, but then it was a case of, it sounds silly, but putting the light on with it, if that makes sense, and actually understanding the reasoning behind it and how that makes sense...so mine's been quite a gradual process, but littered all the way through with different things within the Christian bubble I think is probably the best way to describe it...*

*Diane: I think it was just gradually a building up, like a snowball just getting larger and larger....I do still feel that I haven't totally embraced everything...*

*Debbie: I still feel that.*

*(Members of the group murmur in agreement, some yeahs)*

*Diane: I still feel like there is part of me holding back; now its easier in, obviously, certain company to be true to yourself and your faith and your belief in God but then when you are with other people I feel a bit squashed...*

Speaking about how her faith had grown over time, Diane added,

*Diane: So I think its just a slow layering up but its always been there but now I am doing more about it...*

Diane's story, and the murmurs of agreement from the group, highlight how for group members, seeing faith as a journey (or a developing relationship) keeps it open and seemingly releases them from conceptualising it as a more "closed" system or finished

project. This is significant when understanding the faith of members of evangelical churches. Such churches are often characterised as being more “closed” or “fixed” in their theology than more liberal churches, but the presence of doubt was clearly noted by individuals, with group members nodding and murmuring their agreement – as in the case Diane, who feels she is still in process, sometimes holding back and still hasn’t “totally embraced everything”, or of Darren who noted his skepticism about some aspects of faith:

*Darren: I mean, I’m always very sceptical, its not been easy to give it my all... (Group members murmur agreement)*

In fact, in this research, a much clearer sense of openness to the sense that participants were on a journey where there is still more to learn came through in the conversations in Groups D and E than it did in Groups A and C. It would undoubtedly have been interesting to explore this further, and may be connected to demographics more than theology. It is also important to note here that although definitely evangelical, the churches concerned in relation to groups D and E would be considered “central/open” or “charismatic” rather than “conservative” in their evangelicalism. For now it is sufficient to note the presence of doubt rather than commenting on it further.

Another difference between groups D and E and groups A, B and C was in their emphasis on the importance of small groups in providing a relational context for their faith development. Membership of small groups was more significant in the church experience and journeys of faith of Groups D and E; perhaps unsurprisingly, given the higher emphasis on Bible study and the culture of small groups that is often found in evangelical churches. Participants spoke of the importance of having relationships with both more mature Christians who were further along in their journey of faith and also peers who were sharing the journey alongside them at the same stage. The importance of being able to be vulnerable and honest with these peers - or “real”, as Ed articulated it – was vital, evidenced in this conversation:

*Elaine: For me as an adult, well, I pretend to be an adult, but you know, in my, my I-last few years I would say that more being part of a small group at church has helped my faith develop. E-Equally I mean, obviously, Spring Harvest, New Wine, Soul Survivor, all those things have had an input into*

*my upbringing and my development of my faith, but I, as you get older you question things differently you go through different life stages and I think the support of another group Christians has been more influential on me than those kind of things in the last few years, definitely.*

*Eric: I think being part of a small group has...allows you to be a Christian but also a normal person...(some group giggles) and...do you know what I mean?*

*(Group laughter)*

*Ed: I'd echo that, I, that's been an important thing to me... and certainly coming to a kind of a small group, house group situation has been a massive thing in kind of, moving that on, personally for me, much more than anything bigger if you like....and I that's similar to what other people have said. Actually having, developing in a smaller context people who are able to support you in a much more, erm, its kind of a continuous thing, those people are kind of consistently there over a period of years rather than it being kind of a one-off event or something here or there, and I think, you know, what we said about being able to be a kind of real person is - within being a Christian I would, I'd identify with that because I think when I first kind of went along to small group I was petrified about the whole thing, I thought "what am I coming to?", its bound to be a group of wierdos, not you lot by the way... (Group laughter)*

Life events were also significant factors in faith development, and as with the contrast between Group B and Groups A & C, there was a higher emphasis on a "conversion moment." Experiences similar to those of Bernadette and Brian, described earlier, were far more common in groups D & E. Faith was still clearly described in terms of a journey or process, but there was a sharper emphasis on particular defining moments of commitment, from which the journey then continued.

In Group D there often seemed a clear connection between moments of crisis in their life preceding their moment of "coming to faith" – for example, in the case of Darren, a marriage break up which had come prior to his time painting in the church, or in the case of Doug, a mid-life review that was perhaps harder to define but definitely included a time of distress and review as he felt life was going too fast:

*Doug: I was really enjoying life but enjoying it too much, was just living life too fast and neglecting people, especially my wife, and, and it got to the point where I was really having a bad time with*



*myself, I was just doing everything wrong...and...I just...just doing everything wrong, and then we were invited to a Christening...*

From that visit to church, in those life circumstances and encouraged by his wife, Doug made a decision to come on Alpha, which he found difficult at first but which provided the vital next steps on his way to establishing longer term relationships with the Christian community and making a personal faith commitment.

The interplay between these emerging themes - importance of relationships, the notion of faith being a journey but also an emphasis on a particular defining moment of commitment - was beautifully encapsulated in the story of Denzil – who having stressed that his family had been positive and significant in his formative years, when on to add:

*Denzil: When I was 11 years old I went on a, on a camp which was run by Christians, and each night there was a guy who spoke a small talk about God, and Jesus, and being a Christian, and erm, er.. I can say that for quite a few years before then I had kind of thought about being a Christian and can say I had though what that meant and so it was very, very clear to me...erm...I had been challenged about how old, you know, how old a child can be before they understand what, what that means but I had never ever, ever, doubted in my mind what I, what I, what I felt and what I believed and what I was taking in and um, I can also honestly say that I, it was never a pressurised environment, I never had an experience of feeling like I had to, I had personally to make a decision even though I was in those every, every, two or three times a week, erm...and so on one night I, erm, heard this guy talking, and erm, what he, what they did was they said that if you want to talk more about becoming a Christian, and asking Jesus come into your life, you can come and talk to us, so, it was a camp as in we were all in tents so at about 11 o'clock at night I walked up the field in my wellingtons and knocked, tried to knock on his door (knocks table, some laughter) and erm, walked into his, his, he had a kind of little room there and erm, started talking to him, and erm, he asked me if I wanted to become a Christian and ask Jesus into my life, and I said I really did, because, you know, I also had, I also was aware of Christ coming again, and I, I knew it all, I knew the Bible really, really well even at a young age...and erm... What I'll never forgot was a feeling of, it was very emotional asking Jesus into my life at that point, even at 11, I remember crying a lot, and what, what again I always say is it was never an outside influence... But what I do remember is a feeling of a real fight inside of me so I really felt like the devil was on one side and Christ was on*

*another and really felt like the devil didn't want me to make that commitment and I really felt torn inside and I've never ever had that feeling ever before or since and so when I made that commitment I felt that it was really real for me, a very real emotional, spiritual moment in my life...*

### **3.2.3 – Relationships and the faith “journey” - triangulating the data**

Triangulating this data with the interviews conducted with practitioners and documentary evidence from Alpha, Spring Harvest and New Wine confirms this emphasis on both the importance of positive relationships and growth in faith being a journey. Booker & Ireland (2003:18f) have commented how the structure of Alpha courses has shifted the emphasis away from conversion as an “event” to faith growth as a “process” during the 15 sessions of Alpha. They also highlight the importance of “belonging before believing”, something Alpha’s own training materials also stress (see, e.g., Gumbel, 1994:23). Alpha’s training materials place enormous stress on the importance of a warm welcome and fostering good relationships, openness, laughing, and eating together (Gumbel, 1994:51-67).

On first glance, this might appear to stand in contrast to Davie’s (1994), notion that in the UK many still believe, even though they now don’t belong. A more thorough consideration of what Davie argues would suggest that our research is not in conflict, however. Davie is charting what she sees as long term religious decline in both belonging and belief, albeit that subsidiary belief wanes slower in her view than church attendance. My research confirms that there is a linkage between the two aspects of belief and belonging that Davie refers to, and that if there is to be a recovery and growth of belief in this country as Davie understands it, it will not be able to grow without the attendant belonging/relational connection to a church or community of faith also being fostered. If faith brands can provide a way for people to find a way back into “belonging” in church, they might well enable faith to be reignited again. The experience of Darren and Doug appears to bear this out.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Davie’s work on “believing without belonging” has, of course, attracted critique, not least because of its lack of clarity/sharpness as an analytical tool – so Voas and Crockett (2005:24-25): “We suggest that the only form of believing without belonging that is as pervasive as Davie suggests is a vague willingness to suppose that “there’s something out there,” accompanied by an unsurprising disinclination to spend any time and effort worshipping whatever that might be... “believing without belonging” was an interesting idea, but it is time for the slogan to enter honourable retirement.” Davie has acknowledged the limitations of the concept (2006:33)

Significantly, interviews with practitioners also appeared to confirm the views both that growing faith was a process, and that relationships and belonging were central to this. In their experience of the ministers interviewed, church members had often grown in faith because of the relationships fostered on courses such as Alpha:

*Vicar 1: From my perspective as a minister, if you like, I think the best way to view Alpha [is] as part of a process, and that process starts with befriending people at your church, moves on to inviting them to be part of an Alpha group, Alpha gives them an opportunity to ask questions and to make a Christian response, it gives them an opportunity to be prayed with, it gives them an opportunity to talk with other people, and ideally from my perspective it then flows to Christian commitment and also, er, membership of a small group. So I'd see Alpha as part of a [sic] evangelism/discipleship process rather than just being a course you go on...*

Seeing Alpha as playing a role within a wide evangelism/discipleship process rather than “just being a course you go on” certainly tied in with the testimony of Darren. Moreover, the perspective of this minister, and the data coming out of the focus groups in this project mirror the results of a smaller MRes research project I undertook in 2010 in preparation for this thesis.<sup>28</sup> My small exploratory study involved students from an East Midlands University who had participated on Alpha, and results highlighted the importance of relationships and belonging to participants, as well as the importance of Alpha feeling a safe and open space – a theme which we will return to particularly in chapter 6 of this thesis.

The importance of openness and safety in relationships during the faith journey was clearly important to members of the different focus groups. In Groups A, B, and C this was expressed more in terms of the role that significant individuals has played in participants' lives; in Groups D and E, it was also expressed in relation to small group membership and the way in which relationships within the small group enabled people to walk their journey of faith, highlighted by Eric's talk about “being a Christian but also a normal person” and Eoin's decription of how important those relationships have been over time.

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and developed it further in her concept of “vicarious religion” to provide a more sophisticated account of the way in which churches have retained their significance within society and to understand the present state of religiousness in Europe (2007:137)

<sup>28</sup> My MRes *Evidence Based Practice* assignment, completed as part of my methodology modules and which also enabled me to explore qualitative research methodology during the research process.

We have established that the importance of relationships and the motif of faith being a journey were clear themes within all the groups. There are subtle variations in the structures within which these relationships are expressed – notably the role of small groups, much more prevalent in groups D and E. There is also more emphasis on a moment of commitment in Groups B, D and E, although faith was still clearly expressed as a journey and a relationship that develops over time.

We now examine participants' perceptions of the role faith brands have played in the process of their faith development.

### **3.3 – participants' perceptions about the significance of faith brands in their journey of faith.**

#### **3.3.1 - Groups A-C and the significance of faith brands – a mixed response**

During the focus group sessions, participants were asked whether any faith brands had been significant in their faith journeys. If they agreed they had been, they were asked which ones, and how they felt they had been significant. Initial responses varied greatly – some were unsure, some were sure that faith brands had had a positive impact, and others were more negative about their experiences of the faith brands they had encountered.

The group who were most immediately positive about the impact of faith brands, and among whom awareness and engagement with faith brands was highest, was group B:

*Brian: ...something that has had an enormous impact on my faith has been going to New Wine. Have to say that, because to be honest a week's teaching there, you know has to be worth a whole decade's teaching in your local church...no disrespect to, you know (minister's name). You are exposed to so many different challenging seminars that – you know – some of them just blow your mind away, and seeing God at work actively through the healing ministry and things like that has just really woken me up to what God can and does do in, in people's lives in a way that I hadn't seen previously in a local church situation...*

*Bernadette: It wasn't just New Wine, it was Good News Crusaders before that...*

*Brian: Well before that, that's true, yes...*

*Bernadette: But now when you look back on that you think ooh, dear, that was a bit cringing...*

*Brian: Good News Crusades was a..*

*Bernadette: It still exists!*

*Brian: It's a group from Parr in Cornwell, um, it's very free church, very charismatic, um, and looking back there is a huge cringe factor, but at the time it was what we needed..the very first week we went I would have left after two days, 'cos I couldn't, I couldn't handle seeing the Holy Spirit working in the way it did, but it was actually pouring with rain, and we literally couldn't get the car out of the car park, they had to pull them out with a tractor at the end of the week, so I had to stay, and I was changed by the end of it...*

Clearly, going to New Wine – and Good News Crusades before that – had a powerful impact on both Bernadette and Brian. They were already church members before attending these festivals, and had heard about them through church, but attending and engaging with the festivals has, from their perspective, lead to a marked growth in their faith. It was clear from talking to them that they had been searching and trying different faith brands as part of their journey, and that they perceived New Wine offered the chance to experience something of God in addition to what they had experienced in their local church. Brenda agreed, and talked about how, in addition to her regular church going, she and her husband Bob now attended New Wine every year, and saw this as an ongoing and important part of their faith journey.

*Brenda: ... I was going to New Wine with a friend, because I didn't think that [Bob] would, you know, be interested. When he knew I was going, he said he would come, and now we've been every year since and we've booked for the year after and the year after and the year after that ad finitum and he just doesn't want to stop going.*

*CH: So what is it about New Wine or these other faith brands or personalities or gatherings that...?*

*Bernadette: For me with New Wine, when we went there, for the first time I thought, "Gosh, I agree with everything they are saying here..." 'Cos I had been to Billy Graham and that had left me cold, we'd been to Good News and I'd thought, "oooh, I don't like that, and I don't like that, and I don't like that bit..." I'd done Colin Urquhart's Kingdom Faith course and bits of that, I was thinking,*

*“I’m not sure about that...” We went to New Wine and I thought, “Wow, I don’t think they are saying anything there that I disagree with here...”*

*Brian: What was, what was interesting about New Wine was that is actually was Anglican in originally –*

*Bernadette: Yeah...*

*Brian: It came from St Andrew’s in Chorleywood who were massively impacted by John Wimber in about 87, something like that, um, I think, I dunno, it’s hard, isn’t it, certainly, the wor-*

*Bernadette: David Pytches is so humble, isn’t he?*

*Brian: Yeah...some of the worship we’ve experienced, the, the very first two years or so we went to New Wine I was blown away by worship where I literally felt I was being transported up to heaven as part of that, with Andy Park the Vineyard guy, um, and it was just so powerful...*

This begs the question, partially asked and answered above, about what New Wine, as a faith brand, offers in addition to local expressions of worship, such as a local church?

In part, it seems as if New Wine gave Bernadette and Brian a chance to express their faith and worship in a way that was different to services in their local church. This had been extremely enabling for them. Bernadette’s comments about her experiences with Billy Graham, Good News Crusades and Colin Urquhart reveal that she was clearly on a journey exploring charismatic spirituality, and that New Wine, with its blend of charismatic spirituality but with its roots in Anglicanism seems to be a stream of Christianity where she and Brian feel “at home”. I would guess that the blend of charismatic and Anglican traditions perhaps offered them some ontological security, given they are from an Anglican background, and would certainly imply there was a bit more theological “breadth” than the other faith brands they mentioned. The personal humility of David Pytches, remarked on by Bernadette, is also significant – implicit in her comment is the notion that being able to place trust in his leadership of New Wine as a para-church movement was important to her feeling she was able to trust and participate in what was going on there.

Undoubtedly, partly through the size of the event, New Wine offers more intense experience than an average service in the local church. For Brian, the worship is key, and the style of worship at New Wine, utilising modern technology and contemporary worship songs, is also different to their local church. Ward (2005) offers a fascinating critique of the

rise of the contemporary worship “industry”, and how it has begun to have an impact on the local church. As noted earlier, Brian and Bernadette, like the other participants in this study, were drawn from a fairly central Anglican church rather than a more evangelical and charismatic church where the worship style is similar, albeit on a smaller scale, to that of New Wine. In a way this accentuates the gap between the local church and the parachurch faith brand even more, and helps explain why New Wine has become an important part of their faith journey, since it offers them something they perceive that they don’t receive from their local church.<sup>29</sup>

At this point, we could be tempted to conclude that much of the success of New Wine is to do with size, style and aesthetic. However, in addition to all this, the quality of the teaching (from the perspective of Bernadette, and in comparison with events and courses she had experienced) was also cited as being important. It was evidently not all about an emotional decision for her, since she was clearly critically evaluating each and every faith brand she encountered, weighing up what they were presenting for herself. In addition to this, although it is difficult to express in words, Brian clearly felt that he had experienced God in a new way through the worship (above) at New Wine, and also seen God at work there in ways he had never encountered up until his visit to New Wine:

*Brian: I never forget one year I sat next to someone I’d met in Colchester in a healing seminar, and they asked people to actually come forward and start praying with people, and I thought, I’m not doing that, you know, and - but I really thought God was prompting me to get out of my seat and go, and I walked behind this lady, she didn’t know I was there, and I prayed, “Come, Holy Spirit,” and that was it, she was there on the ground and I thought “Heck, this is for real!” And it had a huge impact on me did that, and I really...the expectation I suppose is that God really does want to impact on people...*

Brian’s own perspective on why New Wine has had a powerful impact, rather than the local church, is not to do with the contrast in terms of size and space. It was clear from the interviews that Brian felt that what was happening at New Wine could happen locally, but

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<sup>29</sup> By “parachurch” I am referring to Christian faith-based organisations that work outside of and across denominations to engage in activities usually related to social welfare and/or evangelism, usually independent of church oversight, but often with trustees or a governing council drawn from leaders of partnering churches. These bodies can be businesses, non-profit corporations, or private associations.

has felt frustrated by the reluctance of the leadership of his local church and its reluctance to engage with what is happening at New Wine.

*Brian: Well the local ch...the thing...the range of things I suppose you can discuss, I suppose at New Wine, I mean, we've been to seminars on church growth, reaching into the community -*

*Bernadette: Celtic spirituality -*

*Brian: Celtic sp- a whole range of those that have practically...brought back to here, and said, "look, we've been doing this," and its actually, not, it's been totally dismissed, so there's not an opportunity, there hasn't been an opportunity, really to develop or witness in the local church what we've seen there, and frankly, its [New Wine] probably kept us going over the last few years...*

Despite frustration with their local church, Bernadette and Brian have continued to be involved with it, but clearly feel that they need New Wine as a resource to "keep them going" in addition to what they receive from their church. This suggests that faith brands and local churches are not rival sources of faith inspiration, but may in fact be considered complementary to one another – either because one resources the other, or because church members who perhaps might otherwise leave a local church to find another church more in line with their theology or preferred worship style are enabled, by their annual visits to New Wine, to feel resourced to serve in their local church over the coming year.

A second observation on Brian's comment that New Wine has "probably kept us going over the last few years" is that it is also an extremely strong statement to make. Reflecting more broadly on Brian's assertion about the importance of New Wine and the history of the church makes one wonder whether in some sense, faith brands offer a modern take on the role of traditional religious Orders in giving a special experience, form of commitment and community outside and beyond the day-to-day experiences of "ordinary" church congregations. Another manifestation of this can be seen in the rise of so-called "New Monasticism". Cray, Mobsby and Kennedy (2010, ed.) argue this is reviving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the essentials of older monastic spirituality are resourcing mission and shaping a distinctive contemporary discipleship for many people in a world where the Church and its surrounding culture often appear to be standing far apart. Might Orders have played a role not dissimilar to faith brands in the past?



Documentary analysis of both New Wine and Alpha clearly show that supporting the local church is central to their own self-understanding. As mentioned earlier, although the annual New Wine conferences are significant, New Wines sees itself as a para-church movement that sees itself as a network of “local churches working together with one vision: to see the nation changed.” (<http://www.new-wine.org/>, [online]) In some respects, this may be more evident to church leaders, who are supported by the work of New Wine’s regional leaders’ networks and events, than to congregation members such as Bernadette and Brian, for whom the annual conference is more significant.

In a similar way, as Ward (1998) notes, Alpha also claims to resource the local church, and effectively works as a franchise, with courses delivered at local level by local churches. Gumbel himself advocates a gradual, relational, process orientated strategy implemented by the local church, rather than a Billy Graham-style event based model for evangelism, claiming that:

if someone is introduced to Christianity at their local church, they become familiar with the place and the people, and are therefore much more likely to stay (Gumbel, 1994:23).

In groups A and C, participants were less immediately enthusiastic about faith brands, and initially found it harder to articulate how their lives had been influenced by them.

*Charlotte: ...I don’t know, I’ve not been to a Billy Graham, or a New Wine...I mean, I think I’m – you know, when you think about it, yes, you are aware of brands, you know, when you go to a church in France you are aware of all that symbolism, but I can’t think that its influenced me particularly, but maybe whether I’ve fought shy of that is maybe another question...*

There were no stories that immediately compared with Brenda, Brian and Bernadette’s experiences of New Wine. However, when they began to talk about it more, they could find examples of how faith brands had influenced them, although the impact was mixed. Cilla’s feelings about Billy Graham, already covered here were one example. Camilla was the only member of a group other than Group B who had been to New Wine, and she had also been influenced by it. This influence, in her view was mixed; generally positive, but not uncritically so, and with an awareness of the perceived dangers of being carried along – she

used the word “brainwashed”, which is a strong phrase - by a large and enthusiastic religious gathering, although she was more positive about the space between the larger “celebration” type gatherings where you could go in to a seminar and find space to get things into perspective:

*Camilla: Would something like New Wine be classed as a faith brand?*

*CH: Certainly, yeah.*

*Camilla: Well, that, that had a lot – a lot of influence on my faith. When I - I first went I just drove down there with [name of daughter] who was about 7 at the time...never driven down so far South before...something made me go, and...I actually saw for the first time ever thousands and thousands of people alive to God – and it was just - in some ways it was almost a little bit like brainwashing because it was almost just mass hysteria, but you could go into the seminars, you could get things into perspective and I came back with loads of questions and [n and n, two Christian friends] were very influential to me then because they had been several times before and...*

*CH: Yep, yep...*

*Camilla: But that was a huge brand that has split so many different ways and I think spawned a lot of things like Trent Vineyard...*

*Cilla: Is Billy Graham a brand? Could he be classed as a brand?*

*(general group murmurs to the affirmative)*

It is interesting note that although there were aspects of New Wine she found disturbing, the experience of coming back from New Wine with lots of questions was not negative for Camilla. These were questions that could be discussed with her two Christian friends in the context of the local church to which they go. In this sense, as a faith brand New Wine has again provided a wider and bigger context into which someone can go, have experiences that challenge their existing perceptions of what it means to be a Christian, and then come back and reflect upon those experiences. This provides yet more evidence for the notion that faith is indeed a process, and sheds light on the interrelationship between New Wine as a para-church faith brand, and the role of the local church as a context in which faith that may have been stimulated or challenged (or even upset) at something New Wine can then continue to grow, or where the questions that have been raised by the experience can be explored.

In Group A, people felt mixed about faith brands that offered a chance to explore faith, which were termed “back to basics” opportunities to refresh their faith – such as Alpha or Emmaus. The key issue for them was whether participants were given opportunities to raise questions and express their doubts, or whether the course/faith brand would be too pushy and dogmatic, and close down any questioning.

*Anne: My fairly limited experience of some of these branding things is...that you go for about eight weeks, boom, boom, boom, boom, you’ve learnt it all, you’ve ticked the boxes, and now you make a decision...and I would run a mile...I’ve seen...well, I just can’t, I can’t cope personally and I’ve seen people close to me and pushed them away forever. Well, forever at the moment.*

*Ailsa: I did an Alpha course and I...I just would never go to one again...*

*Anne: I wouldn’t!*

*Ailsa: I was told I wasn’t a proper Christian because I was questioning*

*Anne: Nope.*

*Ailsa: And um, (group murmurs their disapproval of what went on in that Alpha course) I really was – and I could accept this is someone else’s view...but I still – I’m not sure what a “proper” Christian is but*

*Adam: I’m not sure anybody is!*

*Andrea: Are there any? (laughs, group laughs)*

*Anne: Not that, not that*

*Ailsa: The freedom to doubt...*

*Andrea: There was a hymn yesterday and I thought, “I can’t sing, I can’t sing that...”*

Ailsa’s experience of feeling judged and not being allowed to ask questions of her faith had led her to feel that her experience of Alpha was not a positive one as far as she was concerned. Later conversation revealed that the person who had made her feel like this was in fact a fellow participant, rather than the person running the course, but nevertheless the experience had proved very harmful for her, and she would rule out the possibility of her ever going on another Alpha course or recommending Alpha to others. Anne had, in fact, never been on an Alpha course, but harboured strong feelings of antipathy towards them, evidenced by her agreement as Ailsa was speaking.

Certainly, some critics of Alpha have suggested it is narrow theologically and dogmatic. Brian (2010) has criticised Alpha for primarily “recycling” existing believers – turning them not from non-believers into believers but from one sort of Christian into a more “charismatic” sort. It might be that Ailsa subtly felt this kind of pressure, although suggesting that goes beyond what she said in the focus group. Brian also argues that Alpha has presented a narrow, reductionist account of Christianity, and that there is a danger that people who are not enthused by Christian faith as proposed by the Alpha course materials might be put off of Christianity altogether, even though there might well be other branches of Christianity that they might otherwise have happily espoused or explore.

Ironically, documentary analysis of the Alpha training resources shows that Alpha specifically instruct group leaders to be non-judgemental and not to criticise other churches or traditions within Christianity – one example being the production of a specific introductory guide to running Alpha in a Catholic context. Alpha News goes out of its way to proclaim its ecumenical credentials – one example of this came in February 2010 Tony Blair, a recent high-profile convert to Roman Catholicism, gave an extended interview. On the front cover of that same edition, alongside his picture, the magazine boasted that 30 Catholic bishops recently attended a Bogota event. In every edition the global and multi-denominational reach of Alpha is widely commented on. In addition to this, my own recent small scale study of Alpha in a university context suggested that it is the openness of the course and the sense that this was a safe space to explore and ask questions was one of the things that participants most appreciated about Alpha! That said, as Ireland (2005:17) acknowledges, Brian (2010) does highlight the fact that one outcome of Alpha has been the dissemination of charismatic evangelical theology among existing church goers of other traditions.

It is likely that with any faith course there will be an inherent tension between wanting to create an open space to explore but also to lead people to see the truth of Christian faith. Fowler’s (1981 & 1987) work on the stages of faith development suggests this tension is not necessarily a problem, but clearly participants will need to be handled appropriately in relation to their own journey. One aspect of this that would have been interesting to have explored in a larger study would have been how this tension between openness and wanting to demonstrate the truthfulness of aspects of Christian faith varies depending on the

theology and personality of the church or individual who is running the course – and the course itself. It is simply not possible to generalise on the basis of a study as small as this.

Whatever the case, from the strength of feeling expressed by Anne, faith brands clearly also act as markers of identity within the spectrum of Christian faith – they are seen as representing particular theologies and styles of church. On one level, this has always been the case - as Adam's comments about his university church reveal:

*Adam: The church I mentioned when I was at university was a bit like a brand because there were several “competing” in quotes, Anglican churches within that university town, and you did tend to say I went x rather than y...*

Brands act as a shorthand, and local churches have always tended to have a particular style or ethos, (such as liberal, conservative, charismatic, catholic, or evangelical to name a few terms, which would not necessarily all be mutually exclusive). Faith brands take this to a national and international level, however, and allow Christians to express where they are – or where they are not – in terms of their Christian identity in a way that can be understood nationally and internationally, not just locally. By doing this faith brands also facilitate a degree of transdenominational identification and connectivity – Christians who resonate with New Wine or Spring Harvest within an Anglican context might well feel a stronger connection with Methodists who also do so than they do with some other Anglicans of a differing tradition within the same denomination. This is a theme which we will return to in the next section of this thesis when we move from exploring how faith brands have affected participants' own faith journeys to exploring participants' perceptions of how they have impacted the Church as a whole.

Prior to this discussion of the Alpha, an interesting discussion about the relative merits of home-grown and “branded” faith courses had evolved:

*Albert – We've done that sort of local branding on a number of occasions over the years, haven't we? We've evolved our own 3, 4, 5, 6, week courses ourselves, of one sort or another, not necessarily just imported something...*

Overall, where there was some suspicion of courses that were “imported”, participants in Group A were positive about home-grown courses that had been run in the past and had enabled them to express and explore their faith. The group were asked what was good or positive about these types of courses, and what was less helpful:

*Albert: I think for me actually, any of those courses, whether they come into your branded category or not, you're invited to participate, you're not being lectured at, because I think that is a completely different milieu, the ones I approve of most are the ones where there is active participation.*

*Anne: Where you're allowed to voice your opinions, the fact you don't understand, the fact that you doubt...*

Yet again, permission to explore and ask questions was key, which leads me to conclude that when thinking about the impact of faith brand on someone's faith, the key with faith branded courses might well lie with the attitude and sensitivity of the course facilitators, as well as with the course materials. One person's experience of Alpha might be completely different to another's, depending on who is running the course, and who is participating on the course with them.

Booker & Ireland (2005:48) found in the Lichfield survey of attenders of “process evangelism” courses that a higher proportion of attenders came to Christian faith, commitment or confirmation through lesser-known or “home-made” (i.e., locally written) courses than through either the Alpha or Emmaus courses. They posit that local church leaders are often more able to tailor faith exploration to the particular culture, faith background and spiritual journey of enquirers in a local context. The evidence of these focus groups appears to support Booker & Ireland's argument. In the case of Groups A and C, who seemed naturally suspicious of faith brands, a locally produced course would no doubt avoid this problem!<sup>30</sup>

Booker & Ireland (2005:19-22) sees this aspect of the Alpha brand as both helpful and problematic. The hard work that has gone into designing and branding the course has made Alpha visible and there is evidence that this encourages people to join courses. It is also

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<sup>30</sup> Although arguably, it might well just represent a different kind of brand.

easy for church leaders to purchase discounted Alpha materials and straight forward to run the course. Sandy Miller has claimed that like McDonald's, Alpha aims for consistency across all churches, so that people can recommend the course to their friends in other places with confidence (Booker & Ireland, 2005:21). However, this strength is also a weakness, since although like the McDonald's franchise some limited adaptation to local contexts is permissible, fundamental changes are resisted. The example of McDonald's is perhaps instructive, as Ward's (1998) theological critique of Alpha, drawing on Ritzer's (1993) "McDonaldization" thesis, shows.

More seriously, but outside the scope of this study, in a global context, this raises some important cultural and theological issues around imperialism – Alpha might bear fruit in, for example, East Africa, but it is no substitute for the years of painstaking work by Vincent Donovan and others presenting Christ to the Masai in their own culture and context (Donovan, 1982). Does Alpha evangelise a culture or cultures from within, or superimpose a Western/Christian culture from without – and what are the theological and social justice implications of this?

One final point about faith brands that emerged from the data was connected to the way in which faith brands have sometimes allowed people to express their faith. This is obviously true in the case of New Wine and the discussion above, but as participants thought more deeply, they also found other ways in which Faith brands had enabled their faith to be expressed in activism. One example of this was in social justice campaigning, and the *Make Poverty History* brand, (<http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/> [online]) which was created in partnership between churches, Christian development organisations and all sorts of other organisations in order to create a banner under which the biggest ever anti-poverty movement could gather and lobby for change. Faith brands such as Christian Aid (who are part of the group who formed Make Poverty History) also featured. Cilla recalled how she had taken part in Make Poverty History's Edinburgh protest in 2005:

*Cilla: Well, we went up to Edinburgh and um...that was just...that just didn't feel like – only you know how- it didn't feel like being a part of a brand, er, because of the way it was done, and it was such a fantastic, fantastic experience, but it didn't – you know, because it was a cause almost*

*Celia: That – I was going to say, that is almost what I was trying to say, it's that thing about being together in a common cause and a sort of commonality,*

*Cilla: Yeah, yeah*

*Celia: is where it almost turns the Billy Graham thing on its head where you think "this is good" rather than "someone is trying to get me to do something, sort of mass..."*

*Cilla: That was just it was a just incredible day, brilliant,*

*Celia: Yeah, I bet, yeah...*

*Cilla: And the noise, the sense of...(group murmurs and "yeahs" in agreement)...it was just so lovely, so, so lovely, so many people in one place all with one sort of aim and one thought, one purpose, it was just incredible, and nobody – I mean, you had to queue before we set off on the walk around Edinburgh, you had to queue for ages and nobody moaned, and it was...yeah, it was lovely... (short pause) - What good it ever did I don't know! (laughs, group laughs)*

### **3.3.2 – Groups D and E – a marked increase in engagement and positive perception about the role of faith brands**

The most immediately obvious difference between the groups was that faith brands were markedly more significant to groups D & E, the younger groups who self-identify more closely with evangelical and charismatic theology. The first thing that was obvious from the conversation was that members of those two groups had little difficulty grasping the concept of faith brands. In contrast to Anne, who felt she had limited experience of faith brands, or Camilla or Cilla who expressed uncertainty about how to define faith brands (for example, asking if New Wine or Billy Graham would be classed as faith brands), members of Groups D and E were clear in their minds that firstly, faith brands existed and they understood what they were (even if their conversations acknowledge the reality that branding is a fuzzy concept) and secondly, that they had had significant experience of them.

In group D, many of them had been on the Alpha course and talked positively of their experiences of it. It was even more evident in the youngest group, Group E, who identified with a proliferation of faith brands and the way in which those brands interacted with Christian relationships and their relationship with the local church. Ed could immediately see how these different aspects had interacted in his faith journey and talk about it at length:



*Ed: My faith started with being part of a Christian family, so if we're discussing Christian brands I guess one thing that's well worth, sort of the note of the background of it all, erm - my mum and dad were Christians, we went to church and did different things. I became a Christian at Spring Harvest, so there's a brand straightaway, just somewhere we went - and all the different things that came with it, but I would argue my Christian journey came through knowing other Christians, growing up with other Christians, knowing - I felt like I knew all the stories, but then it was a case of, it sounds silly, but putting the light on with it if that makes sense, and actually understanding all the reasons behind it and how it all that works, so mine's been quite a gradual process, but littered with different things within the Christian bubble I think is probably the best way to describe it. So we're talking mo-moments of going to Spring Harvest because we were part of a church so you all went together, I could throw in a Soul Survivor, I could throw in different things like that that are places where people come together which have become brands because of how they've been sold and how they've been part of it, but at the same time they're just gatherings and other names for a church place together...but I would argue in that sense that because of the way churches run and the way churches gather that its been quite a part within my faith and the way that's grown because its enabled me to learn things in those positions, in those places, if that makes sense...and then its been sort of gradual as it goes through...do you know where I'm going? Does that make sense?*

*(Group murmurs of agreement, yeahs)*

*But certainly yeah, I became a Christian at Spring Harvest, so its had a big influence in that sense...*

In addition to Alpha, other brands mentioned by Group E as being significant to faith development included Spring Harvest, New Wine, the Christian Union (CU) movement at University and the Christian music scene – all well know parts of the “Christian bubble”, as Ed termed it, for young evangelicals in the UK.<sup>31</sup> Despite being more markedly more positive about faith brands than members of Group A and C, members of Groups D and E were not uncritical of faith brands, however.

In Group D, there was a helpful discussion about Alpha, recognising the tension between being faithful to the brand and localised adaptation.

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<sup>31</sup> We might posit that “Christian bubble” is an insightful image perhaps, in terms of its “internalness”, perhaps conveying, whether consciously or unconsciously, a sense – whether borne out in reality or not - of the potential “flimsiness” or “liability to burst” of the bubbles?

*Diane: Just briefly going back to Alpha, it's just - I do like the branding for Alpha, because I kind of...you know what 're going to get, or..*

*(Group agreement) Ah, yeah yeah*

*Diane: So I could recommend it to other people without getting too heavy, and knowing the ground I'm on, and I could say, "Go and do that Alpha, it's..."*

*Doug: Because it has a-*

*Darren: (interrupting) yeah – sorry - it put me off, to be fair, I don't know why...and I didn't intend to do it..but I think that was...maybe that was...yeah, I suppose before I started work in church and I had that moment, before then, I'm not getting involved with them Alpha people, and I think*

*Diane: It's not a heavy sell though, it's never been...*

*Darren: No, but I just think it was just – like [Doug] like, I don't like, no, I'm not mixing...*

*Doug: Not those Crazy Christians!*

*(group laughter)*

*Dee: I think the important thing is not to slavishly follow the brand; so for that, that, the Alpha course you were on, it was adapted quite a lot*

*Diane: Oh was it?*

*Dee: from the textbook to some extent...you know, yes, the ingredients are the content's the same for every one, isn't it, but every one's got their own personality, every one's got their own style, the emphasis..*

*Diane: Doesn't it... wouldn't it depend on who is leading it, as well though?*

*Dee: Yeah...*

This very clearly links in to our previous discussions, but demonstrates that Alpha participants and practitioners are well aware of the limitations of courses such as Alpha and are fairly pragmatic about how to utilise them in a context. Dee and Diane's comments make it clear that they recognise the need both to remain faithful to the core elements of Alpha, but also the importance of customising it in a local context, and crucially, that sensitive leadership is central to the feel (and by implication, the effectiveness) of a course.

For Darren, something about Alpha put him off initially, although his later engagement with Alpha was positive. It is difficult to know from the conversation whether that reluctance was to do with the use of faith branding, his negative preconceptions of church or the

Christians he had encountered linked to the course – “them Alpha people” – or simply a lack of confidence in mixing with a group of people that he did not know who all had something clear in common.

Denzil saw that there are both similarities and distinctions between the way in which faith brands operate and the way in which the franchise model works in business. He argued that far from being a problem, the strength of faith brands such as Alpha lies in the interplay between the central ethos/curriculum and the way in which faith brands can be applied in a local context. Whilst not suggesting that courses like Alpha were in any way a substitute for traditional modes of church, Denzil also expressed appreciation for the way in which faith brands like Alpha offered a Christian pathway that transcended traditional denominational boundaries:

*Denzil: ...with Alpha, you know what you're getting, but there is that manoeuvrability, so if we said tonight, wow, wouldn't it be great if we could do an alpha group, so what we've had, we could - all our knowledge and what we've gone through, we could be part of an Alpha group, but we can, we know the model but we'll put our, w-what we think is really good, or new ideas, or our slant on it, and that's what I like about about Alpha, because it's, it's non-denominational, so, it's not like*

*Diane: (agreeing) Yeah*

*Dee: It gives you a framework*

*Diane: Yeah*

*Denzil: Yeah, it's not like its Anglican so nobody else can have it, no nobody else is gonna be part of it, or we'll have to choose whether you're good enough so...branding with McDonald's is, you have to prove yourself to be good enough to run the McDonald's restaurant, but Alpha doesn't do that, Alpha just says, look, this is the model, and you invite people who want to know more about C-Christ, and if you follow the weekly process each week this is what, this is what it is.*

*Dee: That's the difference*

*Denzil: There is a difference...*

Nevertheless, there was a lively debate about branding in Group D; the potential benefits of improving communication and enabling different ways in to faith were affirmed, both utilising branding and marketing within the local church, and also through courses like Alpha. Denzil was extremely positive about branding, and in many respects Doug was too, although this

excerpt from the discussion between them shows how Doug was also well aware of the danger (argued by Brian, 2010, and mentioned earlier) of presenting a reductionist account of God, or presenting only one aspect of Christianity as all there is and preventing participants from exploring a wider range of branches within the Christian faith.

*Denzil: I'm really for branding, I really think that branding is a really good thing, because in its best, in its best people get, people know what they are getting. The worst that branding can get is that they failed in what they've [promised?] and they're shown for what they've done, and so – and the media picks up on when a brand doesn't work*

*Doug: Well, my point would be, with branding that you can be too shallow, you can just follow one brand*

*Dee: (hesitant) Well, yes, you can...*

*Doug: and it stops people for looking for something else...*

In Group E, similarly, participants were broadly positive whilst remaining aware of potential dangers. In addition to the kinds of concerns raised already, and perhaps qualifying Denzil's comment about faith brands "transcending" traditional denominational boundaries, members of Group E mentioned the dangers of Christian faith brands encouraging "tribalism", or subtle cultural pressure from their churches to engage with particular faith brands.<sup>32</sup> Members of Group E were clear that certain churches identify with certain faith brands across denominational boundaries:

*Ellie: I think its fair to say that for us as a couple before we'd had children we'd been to Spring Harvest once, and I took [Eoin] kicking and screaming to Spring Harvest you were absolutely adamant that this was the last place in the world that you would want to go to be with all these Christians for the entire time, so to be fair we hadn't, I grew up in a Christian family, you felt you should go to should go to Spring Harvest, its one of those, you know, if you are a real Christian you should go and engage with these things, and actually, we did have a great time, but neither of us, w-we both went kind of reluctantly which is ironic because we chose to go, erm, but i- its wierd how there is this kind of feeling that there are certain things within the church that you*

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<sup>32</sup> cf. 1 Cor 3:1-23 and the debate going on between factions in the Corinthian church – "I belong to Paul" v "I belong to Apollos" in contrast with Paul's admonition in v21-23: "21So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, 22whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, 23and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." The issue of tribalism will be picked up later in this thesis as we consider how faith brands affect the wider church.

*should, you should be doing and engaging with maybe Spring Harvest or New Wine or or whatever it is, I dunno, you feel you should maybe choosing one of them and doing it to move on in your faith...*

*Edwina: But that's because of the kind of church you are at.*

*Elaine: I was going to say the same thing*

*Edwina: so I'd never heard of Soul Survivor or New Wine until I came to churches in [city name]...*

*Ellie: Yeah, yeah..*

*Edwina: So it depends on where you're at, doesn't it?*

Interestingly, once again in this excerpt from Group E, the motif of feeling resistance and yet also attraction to being involved Christian brands emerges (the image of Eoin going “kicking and screaming” to Spring Harvest because being surrounded by Christians for the entire time seemed the last place in the world that he wanted to be). Participants acknowledge they had mixed feelings about involvement prior to going to Alpha or Spring Harvest (or even a small group, as with Ed’s words earlier), and yet the experience is felt to be positive once they are involved. There is an awareness of both the pressure of Christian cultural expectation to participate in faith brands, which is clearly vocalised by Ellie, and yet her sense of agency in deciding to go for herself is expressed as she asserts “we chose to go”.

There is also an awareness in both Groups D and E of the fact that some aspects of Christian culture might be dysfunctional or unhelpful – which was dealt with humorously within the group, as the laughter following Doug’s comment about “those crazy Christians” or the group laughter following Eric’s statement about being a Christian but also a normal person and Ed’s statement about wondering if his small group would be full of “weirdos” all illustrate. This concern about Christians being “strange” was very clearly articulated within Group E, and it would have been interesting to have explored further. Was it simply because younger people are slightly less sure of their identity, or more aware the need to negotiate their identity within an image obsessed, media age? From the focus groups it could be argued that it is more likely to stem from a number of factors. Most significantly, the younger church goers seemed very aware that to be Christian is to be counter-cultural compared to older church goers, for whom it was more of a cultural norm in the UK; secondly the younger Christians who have been connected to churches are aware that in some cases, the attempts of the church to be “relevant” can be painfully embarrassing

(branding can go wrong); and finally, these younger Christians in Group E showed an awareness that charismatic churches or movements can sometimes be more “strange” (both in terms of the people that can sometimes be involved in them and the extremes of behaviour or practice that can sometimes be encountered at the fringes of charismatic churches and events). This kind of thing has often been tacitly admitted by leaders within the charismatic movements when there have been debates or controversies concerning aspects of charismatic practice, whilst at the same time defending the core of charismatic theology - as Stackhouse (2004:163ff) observes. However, again, speculating any more on this would at this point go beyond the data within the focus group conversations.

The faith brands mentioned by Groups D and E undoubtedly have a stronger connection with certain types of church – in this case, those that are charismatic evangelical, and we might posit, perhaps even more so with church members of a younger demographic. But at the same time, other members of Group E argued that faith brands do offer ways to combat tribalism. Eric talked about how they have enabled him to broaden his experience beyond the type of church he knew:

*Eric: I remember wanting to go to like, things like New Wine, Spring Harvest, Greenbelt, all because I wanted to interact with new people, new Christians and widen my Christian friendship group...*

These initial reflections on tribalism will be explored again in our next chapter as we begin to reflect on what emerged from our focus groups in relation to faith brands, the wider church and society. Before we do that, however, we will explore how the data as it has emerged so far might dialogue with the insights of Rational Choice Theory.

### **3.4 – Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and the data.**

As we saw in chapter 2, RCT is very far from offering a complete framework within which to understand religion, but it does offer a helpful theoretical background as we try to understand the question of whether faith brands are beneficial or harmful to Christian faith. In this section we will attempt to explore a dialogue between RCT and the data that emerged from our focus groups.

#### **3.4.1 – Relationships and social capital – using RCT to interpret the data**

On the surface, aspects of the data we have looked at so far do appear to tie in well with the insights of RCT. Certainly, the importance of relationships to faith development bears out the arguments of Stark & Fink (2000) about the way in which people attempt to preserve their social capital – consisting of their interpersonal attachments - and their propositions:

PROPOSITION 29. In making religious choices, people will attempt to preserve their **social capital**.

PROPOSITION 31. To the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a different version of their traditional religion, they will reaffiliate.

PROPOSITION 32. To the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a religion in a different tradition, they will convert. (Stark & Fink, 2000:119)

Stark & Fink contend that because relationships with others represent substantial investments of time, energy, emotion and even material – which we can, of course, draw upon in times of need – people will act to preserve these. When people base their religious choices on the preference of those to whom they are attached, they conserve (or maximise) their social capital. They do not risk their attachments by failure to conform, and therefore they do not face the potential need to replace their attachments. This kind of

argument is an application of the control theory of deviant behaviour, based on the rational actor premise (see, e.g., Toby, 1957; Hirschi, 1969; Stark and Bainbridge, 1987; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

Stark & Fink build upon studies of Unification Church members in the US by Lofland & Stark (1965) and Lofland (1966) that appear to show that relationships were key to conversion. However hard the Unificationists tried to share their faith, the only people who joined were people whose interpersonal attachments to members overbalanced their attachments to non-members. In effect, they argue that conversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology – it is bringing one's religious behaviour into alignment with one's friends and family members. Countering those who might question the “rational” aspect of such a basis for decision making, Stark & Fink (2000:137) advance two main counter arguments. Firstly, they argue that although doctrine is not primary in the initial choice, it is nevertheless significant (and becomes more significant later on as converts or reaffiliates decide to remain within a religious tradition). Secondly, they question which is more “rational” – to convert on the basis of doctrinal appeal or to accept a doctrine initially because of the testimony of family and friends? By analogy, they ask, would it be more rational to put faith in advertising than in the firsthand experiences of family and friends when buying a car?

It is an analogy with problematic assumptions – the answer to their question is of course that much would depend on one's family and friends and their knowledge of motor vehicles. There are all sorts of ways to assess choices, and there is a significant difference between buying a car with the financial risk one places in that transaction, and weighing up the truth claims of a faith group. There are other potential problems with Stark and Fink's propositions too – not least, the question of how one might measure or evaluate the relative strength of different kinds of interpersonal attachments when looking at a study of converts and their faith journey. Having differing numbers of friends who might belong to a particular religion does not necessarily outweigh the influence or attachment even to a geographically distant relative you see infrequently.

The research data we have looked at so far would suggest both RCT makes some valid points, but also that it perhaps oversimplifies complex decision making – as Neitz and Muser (1996), Ammerman (1996), Bryant (2000), and Lechner (2007) argue. Participants were



certainly influenced by their interpersonal attachments – be it the slightly older members of the youth group at Andrea’s Baptist church, or the deepening of Bernadette’s faith that had such an impact on Brian. Following one’s wife on her faith journey could certainly be interpreted as a clear way to conserve (and even strengthen) their social capital; and the choice of embracing the charismatic movement within their existing commitment to being members of their local Anglican church would, on the surface, tie in with conserving religious capital too (Stark & Fink, 2000:123).

Interpersonal attachments were key in the faith development process in these cases, and as well as friends and family this was sometimes linked to leaders and teachers, as in the influence of particular ministers on Celia’s faith. However, Celia’s comment that her faith grew during a process where she was “listening to teaching and explanations and then sort of thinking about things that have triggered further explanations and further contemplation of things in my mind” reveals that doctrinal considerations were still extremely important to her. Stark & Fink argue that doctrine usually plays a secondary role when people initially make their choices, but despite the limitations of the data in Celia’s example this does not appear to be the case; doctrinal concerns were primary, or at the very least, doctrine and relationship appear to be playing complimentary roles. A lot of independent thought was going on, weighing the teaching she was receiving. This ties in with Stark & Fink’s (2000:120) notion that religious capital builds over time (see also, e.g., Iannaccone, 1990), but rather contradicts their proposition that conversion depends on an attachment to particular relationships. Similarly, for Camilla, life events – having more time, once her children were in school – and encountering God in prayer were two significant factors in her faith journey. And for Brian, quoted above, it was not simply his relationship with Bernadette that was significant – his experiences of worship at New Wine, and particularly the moment where he invoked the Holy Spirit at the Colchester healing seminar and the lady fell to the ground were pivotal to his faith development process.

In fact, the more faith is seen as a process, the more difficult Stark & Fink’s categories and propositions appear to be in their totality (2000:277-286). There are always exceptions to the rules. Individual propositions often resonate with aspects of the data, but the more detailed our examination of the data becomes, the more difficult it seems to be to explain conversion fully, in sociological terms at least. It would need to be a lifelong study to really

capture the complexity of the data in relation to a person's faith journey, and even then, we could not study them in isolation. From the snapshot of data here, it seems safer to talk about identifying a *range of significant factors* rather than to rely on concrete *propositions and definitions* or attempt a single theory of religion.

Looking at the narratives in groups D & E confirms this further – Ed's family background was clearly significant, as were his experiences growing up in relationship to other Christians. Denzil talked about the role of his family background as he came to faith as a child, Darren about the friend who invited him into church to play cricket that led to his moment in the chapel. But when you look at the detail of each of their narratives, whilst relationships are a significant factor, lots of other aspects are also present. Darren's "bit of a moment" account of finding himself in tears in the George chapel is not a solely "rational" decision making experience; and both he, Diane and other participants are clear that they are still thinking their faith through, and have not fully accepted every aspect of it yet (Diane's comment, "I still feel that I haven't totally embraced everything", which meets with murmurs of agreement from the rest of the focus group). No doubt Stark & Fink might argue this adds weight to their argument that doctrine is secondary to interpersonal attachments – but in fact, there is a much more subtle interplay going on between all sorts of different situational, experiential factors here, not least, participants' perceptions of genuine spiritual experiences. One of the great ironies of RCT is that despite some proponents claiming to defend the existence of faith from the assumptions of secularization theory, in practice RCT appears closed to the existence of God as agent within the conversion process, since the propositions within the theory essentially reduce encounters with God to explainable social or psychological phenomena. The more one engages in dialogue between the theory and actual data in practice, the more Milbank's (2006) caution about the relationship between theology and the social sciences seems pertinent, in particular his concern that theological realities can end up being reduced to mere social functions. Religion simply cannot be encompassed in space as the social whole, the social margin or as social transition: so here the discourse of sociology collapses. Sociology is

doomed simply to rediscover, everywhere, the specifically modern confinement and protection of "the religious sphere." The positivism which defines religion at, beyond, or across the boundaries of the "social fact", is always subverted by a more radical positivism which recognises the peculiarity and specificity of

religious practise and logic, and, in consequence, the impossibility of any serious attempt at scientific explanation or humanist interpretation. (Milbank, 2006:144)

In fact, Milbank (2006:382ff) goes further – arguing that the social sciences themselves are a product of secularism, itself founded on an ontology of violence. Theology must therefore not simply borrow from other accounts of society or history and see what theological insights will cohere with it – for no fundamental account, in the sense of something neutral, rational and universal is really available. Instead, as stated earlier, theology should see *itself* as a social science, explicating and adopting the vantage point of a distinct society, the church (hence his assertion that it is possible to consider ecclesiology also as “sociology”). These observations, made concrete through engagement with the data, appear to confirm the appropriateness of critical realism as a methodological stance, and offer affirmation to the discipline of Practical Theology.

Finally, in addition to the problems of reductionism in relation to religious experience, there are two other significant problems. First, when looking at RCT alongside the data, whilst rational evaluation was clearly going on for participants as they embarked on their faith journey, I would argue (with Spickard (1998), Bryant (2000) and Lechner (2007)) that even with Stark and Finke’s nuancing of Iannaccone’s (1997) economic approach, it is not at all clear that the initial premise of RCT as proposed by the exponents of RCT pays sufficient attention to psychological evidence on the complexity of actual decision making.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, it is not clear why RCT explains the existence of faith – since when you examine them against the data, it becomes clear that many of the propositions within Stark & Fink’s theoretical approach could, also be equally applied in a study of why people decide against religious faith if a focus group of them had been convened in place of the groups I spoke to (Furseth & Repstad, 2006:118).

What then, might be said constructively about what RCT has to offer in understanding the data? RCT is helpful in assisting the practical theologian to interrogate the data, and in offering a framework for understanding the social context that underlie aspects of it – albeit a flawed and incomplete framework. RCT might not explain the whole story, but judging from the data we have looked at so far it could certainly be argued that there is truth in

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<sup>33</sup> See also, e.g., James’ (1902) classic study on “the varieties of religious experience”.

some of the propositions, and notions such as social and religious capital help us understand more fully why relationships might be so important within the faith development process.

For the purposes of this study, however, we need to look deeper and try to ascertain whether there are clues as to why and how, according to RCT, faith brands assist individuals to make choices about their religious journey. If brands act as a shorthand to enable people to make choices with less risk, then faith brands, in theory, ought to do the same, and participants' perceptions – both positive and negative – appear to suggest this is the case. The process through which this happens may be untidier and more multi-faceted than RCT might suggest, but nevertheless, one can discern in the data that faith brands offered opportunities for people to reflect and engage as they reflect on the choices they wished to make.

One might posit that Alpha worked for many of the participants in Group D because it offered a context in which they could build social capital with members of the church whilst at the same time as exploring whether or not they wanted to deepen their faith. This kind of process approach offers a setting to test new ways of being experientially as well as being a place where people can express and explore faith before making the step of re-affiliating. Alpha graduates the process and pays attention to interpersonal attachments at the same time as doctrinal considerations. The extent to which a course allowed exploration or was prescriptive was a key concern of Anne and Ailsa in Group A.

For Bernadette and Brian, New Wine was a space linked but in addition to their existing church affiliation where they could put their faith into practice, and experience a wider context of teaching and worship with others. Interestingly, neither spoke about New Wine in a way that suggested they were making relationships with others there and increasing their social capital – although the different nature of a festival you visit with your family or friends as opposed to coming on a course like Alpha and being placed into a small group for the duration of the course probably explain this difference. For Bernadette, the link New Wine already had with Anglicanism and their existing social and religious capital undoubtedly assisted her willingness to attend. Brenda also attended accompanied with a friend from her church. The relationship and interaction between festivals like New Wine, Spring Harvest and the local church was important for them, as it was for members of Group E. Looking at

the journey of Ed – his “gradual process, but littered with different things from within the Christian bubble” it seems as if sometimes these festivals and brands offer a kind of “third space” in addition to the home and the local church where faith can be acted upon and weighed in safety. One might posit that exploring questions or opening oneself up to new experiences at a Christian festival reduces the risk that might be felt if those questions or experiences were to take place in one’s home setting – which would certainly fit with RCT’s emphasis on protecting existing capital. The question of how faith brands relate to the existing church is an interesting one and one that will be explored in the next chapter as we begin to move beyond individuals and look at the wider implications of branding faith.

### **3.5 Provisional Conclusion – faith brands and their impact on individuals**

The data from the focus groups shows that faith brands have been significant to some, if not all participants' journeys of faith. That said, even where engagement has been limited, participants showed an awareness of faith brands, and in some cases, they have been actively avoided – which arguably means they are impacting upon people's faith, if only by confirming their desire for the more traditional or local styles of worship with which they have been familiar.

Where faith brands have been beneficial they have been ways of exploring or engaging with faith – from the opportunity to engage with a social justice issue, to the worship and teaching that is accessible through New Wine, to process-faith exploration courses such as Alpha. Sometimes faith brands have been perceived to have had a negative effect – most obviously in the case of Ailsa's experience of Alpha, and to a lesser extent, Cilla's trip to see Billy Graham (since the experience of a silent football stadium clearly made her reflect on something present in the gathering, even if the style of the presentation was not to her taste).

Faith brands have succeeded in helping people grow in their faith when they have offered something in addition to what is found in a local fellowship, but crucially, in each case, there has been space and openness for participants to also process what they are experiencing and weigh/appropriate it for themselves. In the case of New Wine, there was clearly something happening for Bernadette and Brian that they had been hungry for, but were not experiencing in their local church context. However, unlike other charismatic festivals they had been to, the teaching there also resonated with their context and faith journey. For Camilla, this was less the case, although she still admitted it had had a big impact, and appreciated the seminars helping her appropriate what she was experiencing in the bigger meetings. She also found it helpful to continue the process of reflecting on her experience in her home context with Christian friends when she had returned home. In Group E too, there was clear evidence that it was in the interplay between the local context – perhaps more pertinently, the small group of the local church, or their wider Christian family – and larger Christian brand gatherings that growth occurred.

Another point to note is that the importance of good relationships in nurturing faith was clear from the outset of the focus groups, and this, along with the creation of a safe space to explore faith would be important for any participant when taking part in a faith exploration course, such as Alpha. The discussion of Alpha participants in Group D made this clear. Where a faith brand fails to offer this – as in the case of whether because of the brand materials and values themselves, or because of clumsy local utilisation of a faith brand's resources - participants were unlikely to move forward in their faith as a result, and indeed, their bad experience could also result in damage to the reputation of that faith brand.

In relation to RCT, the data exposed both the limitations and some of the more insightful aspects of the theory. Participants within the study did appear to weigh up the costs and benefits of their religious affiliation, and the notions of religious and social capital helped to illuminate why relationships are so central to the faith development process. However, using the theory alongside the data highlights the limitations of RCT in truly capturing complex decision making beyond the rational, as well as exposing crucial differences between a traditional sociological and a theological approach to studying religion (Milbank, 2006).

Finally, it was clear from the three focus groups that were interviewed that those from Group B, D and E, who self-identified more closely with evangelical and charismatic theology were much more positive about faith brands. The familiarity and engagement appeared to be higher and wider in the youngest of the groups, Group E. It might be unwise to draw too many conclusions about this given the limited nature of this study, but nevertheless it is a theme which will be drawn out further and explored more in Section 4, where we consider the slightly more abstract question of how participants perceived that faith brands have impacted the wider church, but also begin to explore some of the questions that faith brands raise.

#### **4. Research & critical analysis (2) – faith brands, the wider church and society**

Although this project started out exploring the impact of faith brands on the development of faith of individuals, the impact of faith brands upon the wider Church is also important. This is partly for theological reasons – since faith is not just individual but corporate – and partly because, of course, in the long term the wider context of the Church will begin to affect individuals at local level. This chapter will develop a number of themes which relate to what has gone before that can be helpfully explored in a wider context. It will conclude by drawing out the themes that will be the focus of the major theological reflection in the later chapters of this thesis.

Participants in all of the groups were asked how they felt faith brands may have influenced society, or the wider church, and about their view of the increasing prevalence of faith brands.

##### ***4.1 – Evangelical/charismatic participants were more positive about faith brands than those from a less explicitly identified theological position.***

Unsurprisingly, as we have already seen, Groups A and C were less positive about faith brands than Groups B, D and E, at least in their initial reflections. This was true both in terms of how they perceived faith brands had influenced society and the wider Church, and also in relation to the increasing prevalence of faith brands.

*Ailsa: It's the word "brand"...*

*Andrea: Yes...*

*(various group murmurs)*

*CH: So why - but I'm interested - why is the word "brand" off putting?*

*Ailsa: Because it's – it's so commercial...*

*Andrea: It's an organismic [sic] thing*

*Anne: God's organic and not something like that*

*Albert: A brand is something that is defined, and it's there and it's fixed, and for me, I have a problem with that notion...[when applied to God]*



There were also reservations about the language of the marketplace and faith – the dangers of what they perceive as a “capitalist mindset” infecting the church, or the dangers of branding and marketing only offering a reductionist account of the richness and diversity of Christian faith:

*Angie: I remember someone saying years ago saying something like, “Oh well, of course, you know now that churches have to be like businesses, and that put me off...”*

*Alanis: If we have to go out there and market God, I don’t think that’s what we are about...*

*Albert: You actually only brand a little bit of it [faith] at any one time, because none of these brands are all-encompassing, and anybody, all of us would actually say well faith is this wide, but your brands only look at a tiny bit of it and sell the product as, well this is what this is...*

Albert’s reservations neatly encapsulate one of Brian’s (2010) reservations about Alpha, mentioned earlier. One could posit that a theologically more liberal or broad church group would have more reservations about narrow interpretations of the gospel, and would perhaps have “fuzzier” edges about what constitutes Christian faith anyway. However, the research data suggests that although Groups B, D and E were more positive about utilising modern marketing within the church, and about faith brands, they were far from uncritically accepting. Although they were more openly evangelical and charismatic, Bernadette’s earlier comments about the teaching at some of the faith brand events she had been to before also show that they would be far from being “narrow” in their evangelical commitment. The presence of doubt and questioning in the faith journeys of members of Group D and E has also already been shown.

That said, the denomination to which all the participants of the group belonged to is not averse to using branding. Miles (1998:1), observes that in 1996, the Church of England adopted a corporate logo in an attempt to “rid the Church of its muddled image and provide a ‘common visual identity’ for its 13,000 parishes.” The Revd. Eric Shegog, interviewed at the time, said “the Church is one of thousands of bodies competing for attention in the media marketplace, and we have got to do it efficiently.” He added that the Church sought a symbol that had “gravitas with a contemporary feel.” (Miles, 1998:1). The

creation of a corporate logo indicates that denominations do act as brands in some ways, but the evidence of the groups is that participants certainly appeared to show a very different perception of the role of faith brands to the role of their church or denomination, which they showed no awareness of being a “brand” when interviewed. This is evidenced by some of the strong reactions to faith brands, both positive and negative. Although Group D very clearly felt that one or two of the newer churches might be considered as “brands” and could recognise use of branding methodology in the local church, they did not indicate that they thought of the Church of England as a brand.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, although groups B, D and E were more positive about faith brands, they were not uncritical. The discussion between Doug and Denzil in Group D – specifically, Doug’s concern that “with branding that you can be too shallow, you can just follow one brand” – were similar to the reservations Albert had. As the discussion unfolded, as a group they were able to articulate clearly that God was not a brand, and also that they felt positive (albeit in a critically aware way) about the appropriateness of using marketing methods in explaining the Christian faith.<sup>35</sup> They expressed a belief that branding could be helping in enabling people to make an informed choice about whether to believe; and also help people find appropriate places within the Christian church to explore faith at a pace and intensity suited to their stage of the journey:

*Dee: I think faith is a brand...to me,*

*Doug: Yeah*

*Dee: God, Christ, they’re [sic] not brands, and you shouldn’t put marketing on that, but for me, it’s group situations or courses like alpha are branding of - just to give it an identity of what you’re going to meet when you get to the course. I don’t see the faith part as a brand at all it’s just, it’s just the, they’re like subdivisions, to me...*

*Diane: Like [Denzil] said, like a reliability*

*Dee: Yeah*

*Diane: In that name*

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<sup>34</sup> In a way, maybe this illustrates how established brands can become a part of life – like “Hoovers” they become so permeative they are no longer recognised as particular. How conscious does one need to be of a brand for it to be a brand?

<sup>35</sup> This highlights the way in which participants could distinguish between the “brand” and the reality of God – a recognition perhaps, of both transcendence and the necessity of incarnation. The group seemed aware that there is something about the very nature of the divine that has to be “unbounded” in a way that brands cannot, but also in the need for the gospel to be embedded in a culture.

Dee: Yeah, its like styles of groups...I know if I go to that group I'm going to be in the beginner's class...that brand's the beginner's class brand. This other brand is the advanced class, and I'm going to get some serious bible testings and learnings and stuff and that might be a different brand, but I don't see the faith as the brand, its just the – the style of group and what you get when you get there, that, that's how I see it...

Doug: I think you've hit the nail...faith isn't a brand...

Dee: No, no its not, and I think it feels so, like so sacrosanct, (group murmurs of agreement) but it's just these groupings of people doing different things...

Diane: In order to get to the -

Dee: Yeah

Diane: - the centre...

Dee: It's like you say,

Diane: the centre of the wheel

Dee: but God in the middle, he's not round though

Darren: I do get excited about outreach now though, about bringing people in, I get excited when – where before I would be hiding away from it, especially with my industry and stuff, er, so, people mention it and I am straight there, and talking about, about the positives and what it's done for me and things like that.

Daniel: To me, it's all about the connect-connections, it's making the connection to people to open up that channel that will stimulate something in them to help them to actually want to go and find God, and um, different channels work for different people erm, and I guess the church is - tries to open up, open up different areas of connectivity to try and draw as many people in...

Dee: You have to promote that, don't you?

Diane: Yeah. (group murmurs of agreement, yeahs)

Dee: You know, that's why you need a logo for Alpha, 'cos you're promoting, "we're having this beginners group," or whatever it is, and that's how you are reaching out to people, aren't you? They need to find out about it somehow, so the marketing is about communicating with people...

(murmurs of agreement)

Dee later added that in a brand saturated age, if the Church is going to share faith in a way that is relevant to younger people, the Church will need to utilise branding. This of course goes to the question of how far does utilisation give over power to what is utilised so that the tail wags the dog.

*Dee: They [young people] are being bombarded with images and logos and texts and stuff all the time, and how they're going access things as they grow up...I suppose communication from the church will have to adapt with that change in technology and how people get information now...*

*Darren: It makes me want to go and live in the woods....(yeahs, agreement, group laughter)*

Darren's comment – "it makes me want to go and live in the woods" – and the accompanying group laughter is a tacit acknowledgement of a feeling that the world is changing, not necessarily all for the good, and was followed by an amusing and slightly nostalgic exchange about television and the ridiculous choice of breakfast cereals available these days. The good and the bad – or, using the language of RCT we might say, the costs and benefits - of living in a consumer age are issues of which the group members showed a high awareness. Nevertheless, there was a feeling that the church cannot simply divorce itself from this new reality, but has to engage itself somehow if it is to communicate with the younger generation. There was a recognition that brands were important in helping people make decisions about what kind of church might be attractive to them. Again, thinking about RCT, we might argue that branding churches helps preserve social capital (Stark & Fink, 2000). Branding might enable people to feel more confident that a particular church would be a place where one might find people of a similar age and background to them, and thus minimise the transition (cf. Lofland & Stark, 1965 and Lofland, 1966). Diane and others expressed this clearly as they named the Vineyard as a "brand" and admired the design of a recently built church in a local city:

*Diane: I think with the young people, reaching out, and even also with the Vineyard brand, 'cos I do see it as a brand 'cos it's a very big sleek organisation*

*Dee: It's useful, isn't it?*

*Diane: And it, you know, attracts a younger crowd, and...*

*Darren: It does...*

*Diane: And, you know, they expect a level of...*

*Denzil: I mean, have you seen the new [church name] church?*

*Diane: Yeah, it looks super; amazing isn't it?*

*Denzil: There you go. How can you say that isn't being branded?*

*Diane: I know.*

*Doug: I know, it has, it has, but I was thinking about..*

*Denzil: Somebody has really thought about how it looks...*

*Doug: that architect put that cornerstone in there...you know, that cornerstone*

*Diane: And that big lovely coffee area that you see as you are driving past (yeahs, group agreement)*

*Denzil: They've thought about it, they've really thought about it, haven't they?*

*Dee: Its all about the look...*

*Darren: But the thing is, I drove past it the other day, and [name] said, what's that all about? Why don't you go there?*

The comments of the group, including Darren's comment at the end of our excerpt where his friend asked him "what's that all about? Why don't you go there?" clearly demonstrates how effectively branding a church in a style that appeals to a particular group of people might be argued to minimise the risk/cost of a religious switch by preserving social capital.

Group E, as we saw in our last chapter, were also, like Group D, constructively critical about faith brands, and for similar reasons. The importance of discernment and testing was stressed by Ellie, who felt that as a Christian she had to exercise responsibility for weighing up what faith brands presented for herself; although within ministry, the group also talked about the way in which certain faith brands they have come to trust now facilitate choice for them within the church – as guarantors of quality, in much the same way as high street brands do.

*Ellie: I think I'm fine with them as long as you are discerning – I think it, you need to take the same attitude you would take to any brand in life, that no brand is intrinsically good or intrinsically bad and you've just got to be discerning about each product that they produce and judge it on its merits but appreciate that you actually might be a little bit influenced – yeah, my word be just be discerning, and not just accept things because "oh, you know, that's, that's Spring Harvest, and Spring Harvest is always brilliant", and just to test each thing that I guess you're presented with.*

*Elaine: That's interesting, because I, I would, I see where you're coming from, I've never really thought about faith brands before and I would maybe think of brands such as Spring Harvest or New Wine, I would instinctively trust more because it came from a Christian background than, I dunno, Nike or McDonalds, or - you know what I mean, there's none....*

*Ed: And you would trust the name more than you would a smaller version of something, wouldn't you? If you saw-*

*Elaine: Yeah...*

*Ed: It would be interesting seeing, as a children's worker your sort of view, in a way, that must be good rather than a non-known name*

*Ellie: Yeah...*

*Ed: likewise if you see new songs by Spring Harvest you know they've been tried, they've been tested, so you follow that rather than a new worship leader who you've never heard of, so whether brands are useful because of the name element sort of side?*

*Everard: I think they, I would say, that going down that route, they are useful; in terms of, you know where your safety net is –*

*Ed/Ellie (together): Yeah...*

*Everard: - so I would use Scripture Union as a safety net, I wouldn't say I'd use it regularly, because I know that there is other stuff out there and I've got time to investigate them, but if someone was to say "I'm running a group, what should I do?" I would tell them Scripture Union, because its a known – and, yeah -*

*Edie: I would second that if I am searching for something on the internet and I see a Scripture Union because I think I have to check it less...or check it - it's pretty much ready to print out and use, if th - it's...tried and tested, it's probably safe*

*Eleanor: I think we've said before we've used Scripture Union, that we always use 8-10s for a lower age group, so it's quite useful because you know who they are aiming at, but you know in some way which - what their flaw is...*

Edie, Everard, and Eleanor's discussion of Scripture Union materials is particularly instructive – since they talk both about the importance of “knowing” the Scripture Union brand, but also because of the notion of “adaptation” implied in the conversation about the way in which they tailor the material for different age groups. Again, RCT notions of “preserving social capital” might be considered significant here, albeit not simply in terms of relationships, but also in terms of theology/belief systems – the role of brands as “risk reducers” was clearly articulated. Everard's conviction that he knows enough about Scripture Union to know the materials as being “a safety net” – whether he is talking about the ease of use, the educational quality of what is being offered, talking about doctrinal concerns or something else – shows a high level of trust, but at the same time, Eleanor's

admission that she uses the material differently from the way in which the writers intend (adapting it by using it for a different age group) when you use Scripture Union “you know what their flaw is” is critical for understanding what happens with faith brands in the local church. Perhaps in some sense it is the very “artificiality” of brands and the consciousness of this that allows the possibility of a properly critical approach to brands in a way that some might feel less comfortable with in relation to a generic notion of “Christianity.” The notion of “adaptation”, also discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to Alpha, shows both an acceptance and a critical engagement with a faith brand.

In terms of the impact of faith brands on the local church – and the wider Church – the function of brands as guarantors of quality, and the notion of adaptation illuminate a deeper debate about the impact of brands on faith. In relation to Alpha, Einstein (2008:115) notes the relative flexibility of the course, although in part this is down to tailored materials being available through “brand extensions” to differing contexts (youth, students, prisons, lunchtime in a work context, etc.). Booker & Ireland (2005:20), note the tension some practitioners find when wanting to customise further in their own context. The HTB Copyright statement is clear:

Holy Trinity Brompton accepts that minor adaptations to the *Alpha* course may occasionally be desirable. These should only concern the length of the talks or the number of sessions. In each case the essential character of the course must be retained. *Alpha* is a series of 15 talks, given over a period of time, including a weekend or day away, with teaching based on all the material in *Questions of Life*. Gumbel (1994:224)

In a busy world, do faith brands offer important resources to assist with faith initiatives at local level? Or, in fact, do they in some sense stifle innovation? If “adaptation” implies a level of discernment about the qualities of a brand not simply being utilised “out of the box”, it certainly also implies that there needs to be a level of continuity with the brand. Whilst at the same time as wanting to resource local evangelism, Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) feels a need to protect the *Alpha* brand from misuse – they want a consistency across all *Alpha* courses that enables people anywhere in the world who sign up to *Alpha* to know what they are coming to, in rather the same way as a Big Mac in Florence tastes the same as a Big Mac bought in Derby city centre. This tension between the global and the local is a fascinating outcome of utilising branding methodology in the church. On the one hand, one might feel Ritzer’s (2008) concern about the McDonaldization of society, and worry that the rise of

globally recognised faith brands might homogenize faith, flatten local diversity and stifle innovation. On the other hand, one might argue that faith brands such as Alpha have released enormous creative energy in the church – potentially reinvigorating local congregations in their witness to the community as people utilise well know faith brands, adapt them, move through and beyond them or react to them. Or, following Appadurai (1990) and Robertson (1995) one might recognise that these phenomena are products of cultural flows that facilitate interaction between the “global” and the “local” and suggest a middle way of “glocalisation”, as Wagner (2014) references in his study of standardisation and adaptation in the experience of the Hillsong “sound” in worship.

In Group E, awareness of how national and global faith brands affected the local church was very apparent.

*Edwina: But I think one thing about Christian brands is that...oh, I don't know what I was trying to say...it maybe allows stuff to come out to the - for us to see – like, I can think of - I don't know what I'm trying to say – like, without the brand – like, thinking for example worship central – without that brand there would be all sorts of Christian music we would never get to hear. And so actually these brands are allowing Christian work to be shared and used for the church so that's a positive, er, and a positive has to be if these brands are growing, then I, I think my view would be “well that's great, the Christian message is going to get to more people, so that's a positive”.*

*Eleanor: But I think brands can be negative for smaller churches though, 'cos you're getting kind of super churches and stuff like that, like Hillsong and things like that I think that can actually – brands, what we have to be careful of, because they're actually getting quite detrimental to small churches, 'cos people are leaving smaller churches when they are needed in small churches to join churches that have the kind of brand music and the brand kind of, like, you're getting kind of more lively churches, and all the kind of the youth and all the like, kind of, people like, the kind of music groups, stuff like that are leaving and going to churches that are already saturated with talent and then, kind of, saturated with people that have, kind of, you'll get 5 or 6 bands that are only getting to play like, once every six weeks or so where you've got all these small churches that are really needing people in them and um, because of this branding, and because of things like that – it's actually – so I think that's kind of a negative, in like, kind of, element of brands.*

*Edwina: That's interesting, and I agree with you, but I would say to that, what are the small churches doing about that? And actually, as somebody who has made a very distinctive choice*



*about what kind of church to go to, I think if people are leaving small churches to go to these what might be branded churches, there must be a reason for that, and I think it – I would want the smaller churches to look at themselves and say, “Hang on a minute; are we doing what’s right? Are we attracting people?” I d- so there’s - it works both ways.*

*Edna: Yeah, I’d totally agree, um, one, from the point of view, um, I used to work at Waterstones, and they’ve just, like, redone their whole brand and stuff, so we’ve learnt a lot about how much brand is important, I think the church is often really bad at branding stuff, and branding stuff is actually just a really helpful commercial tool that helps you sell stuff better, that helps you bring people in, and if the church isn’t good at that then we make our own bed to some extent, and I think smaller churches need to get a lot better at it but then there’s probably some emphasis on the bigger churches to teach the smaller churches how to do that and to sort of spread that around, so there’s some of that on both sides I think.*

*Edie: And different churches fit different people.*

What this illustrates yet again is a high level of awareness of the debates and issues about branding, and, in this case, the growth of the mega-church movement and how it is affecting the wider church. One interesting contrast between groups D and E in their constructive-critical approach and groups A and C in their less positive comments was that groups D and E were much more concrete in the examples and debates they gave (about worship music or large churches, for example) whereas groups A and C tended to be negative about faith branding, but in a much more abstract way – perhaps reflecting the fact that they were less immersed in that aspect of church culture. Ailsa, Andrea, Anne and Albert’s earlier exchange demonstrated a conceptual difficulty in even applying the notion of branding to church; commerce and faith were felt to be two separate and incompatible spheres. This came through again and again in their discussions:

*Albert: I’m not sure I approve – er - like the notion of applying that [branding] to faith. It doesn’t work for me, it may work for other people*

*Angie: It was shocking actually to hear; it made me - sorry – I’ll try not to be political - it made me think of the coalition (group laughter, agreement) the marketplace, the price of everything*

*Alannis: You just can’t go and get when you want it in the same way, can you? You just can’t go to a,*

*Angie: no*

*Alannis: you just can't go to any one place, and if you've done an Alpha course, and*

*Angie: I'd like a bit*

*Alannis: say I'd like another bit of it,*

*Angie: I'd like a bit of Christianity today*

*Alannis: It starts you off...*

*Adam: And the other thing, actual label makes you think about its conventional usage you know in marking, and you know a brand is trying to sell you something and probably over-hyping, (lots of "yes" and agreement) errr, in itself and or in the ad they're trying to get you to go for them rather than something else*

*Anne: I think that's really a good phrase (lots of group members saying "yes" in agreement); that kind of puts it in a nutshell.*

*Yeahs, mmms from the group in agreement*

*Angie: But you see, I-I remember – ooh, years ago – saying something about - and I can't remember what we'd done and he said well, of course, you know now, churches have to be like businesses (group intakes of breath) – and that, for a long time that put me off and I used to mull over it and mull over it, and think - but then I thought, well yeah, you know, it's modern times, you know, we've got to sort of probably*

*Alannis: Yes*

*Angie: go along with all this, like we're not in the internet and we don't want to be on the internet, but we're going to have to be eventually we know, because you're not going to be able to do anything unless you are*

*(laughter)*

*Alannis: But – yeah, I know what you're saying...you don't sell god*

*Angie: Churches are businesses now*

*Alannis: Well they have to be buy that's just the outside management of it – its not the –*

*Angie: It's not the fabric of it*

*Alannis: It's not what matters to people, and it can't be. If we have to go there, out there and market God – that's not what – I don't think that what's we're about.*

*Angie: There's a danger that that's what branding can seem, isn't there?*

It might well be that this reticence about simplifying, commoditising or "selling" faith is partly due to theological differences. Whilst issues of doctrinal truth are important to them, as Stackhouse (2004) notes (for good and for ill), evangelicals might well be more accepting of

brand methodology because they tend to be more pragmatic about church practise in the service of mission. We will consider this later. Triangulating this data with interviews from practitioners also suggests that demographic factors – particularly age - play a significant role in the differences between the groups.

Vicar I, who is the vicar of a church best described as “open evangelical” (with a wider age profile than the church from which our initial three Focus Groups were drawn), suggested that one of the roles of faith brands in his church is that they act as markers of identity. This he claims is particularly the case for younger members who are part of a post-traditional, network society. In some respects, national and international faith brand affiliation is a more relevant marker of their identity within the spectrum of Christian theologies than their local church affiliation – in fact, faith brands often help to identify different groups within the same fellowship, as well as attracting them to that fellowship:

*Vicar I: I think they are a way of marking where you are on the map, the church map really, and I think they are often code or shorthand for a particular style of churchmanship – um – interesting conversation for me was with a new family who joined our church a little while ago who were looking for a local church, and one of the things that drew them to [church name] was the fact that we were running Alpha. Now, they weren't going to go on Alpha, they didn't need to go on Alpha; but the fact that we had Alpha told them that we were a certain kind of church, and that was the kind of church that they were looking for. The fact that we were an Anglican church didn't matter too much, they would've happily go to a Baptist church, it was the fact that we were the kind of church that runs Alpha...*

Later on in the interview he expressed the view that the Alpha brand's appeal was often to people younger than the age of those involved in our Focus Groups. He argued that, in his experience, church members aged over 45 (like the Focus Group participants) were more attached to traditional identity markers, such as denomination. Those under 45 were much more willing to switch denomination, were more mobile and had often moved into the area rather than grown up in it. This meant they had less of an attachment to a local congregation, had more of a consumer mind set when looking for a church to join (in itself a consumer phenomenon) and were more likely to be willing to travel to a church by car. Those under 30 had even weaker denominational allegiances, their first contact when

looking for a church was often through the internet or social networks, they were much more shaped by faith brands and were looking for a church that had an informal style, perhaps like the faith brands towards which they felt an affinity.<sup>36</sup>

It seems plausible from this that age can play a role in people's acceptance or otherwise of branding within the church. This study is not large enough to conclusively answer that question, but the Groups D & E certainly appeared much more comfortable with the notion of branding, both in terms of how they grappled with it conceptually, and also thinking about how it applied to the church and being able to very quickly debate concrete examples. This was evident in, among other examples, the conversation that members of Group D had about the new church with its lovely coffee area and the need to communicate to younger people. The discussion that Group E had was about how members of different churches tended to identify with different types of faith brand as markers of church identity – on the one hand, in their desire to help Christians grow and equip the church they are “different expressions of the same thing”, as Eoin put it (despite some bewilderment he expressed at first coming on to the Christian scene and coming face to face with a plethora of different brands). As well as this sense that Christian faith brands were different approaches to the same thing, there was also an acknowledgement that they also marked out tribal and theological differences within Christianity, a fact that could be both helpful but also potentially problematic.

*Everard: Christian brands can also be very political.*

*Edna: Yeah*

*Everard: Because – there are - the reason brands exist is because they don't want to be with another brand – I mean, you know, when, the whole thing with New Word Alive splitting from Spring Harvest...(group murmurs, mmms) it's – why, why are those two things...yeah, but, New Word Alive used to be part of Spring Harvest and then they set up their own one because they disagree theologically with something which is too much to continue*

*Ellie: Or they've outgrown it? Like with Soul Survivor outgrew*

*Everard: New Wine*

*Ellie: New Wine*

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<sup>36</sup> For an introduction on some key debates about the interplay between religion and identity as a core theme in the sociology of religion see Greil & Davidman (2007).

Everard: Yeah. The youth work got so big that they set up something new, yeah.

Edie: I think those big Christian brands – and I only can speak of Spring Harvest and New Wine because I've had experience of both of those, and I've been on team at both, actually they need to be very careful and only 'cos, I, perhaps I've heard it more, that they don't criticize too, each other too much, because actually at the end of the day they are both working for the same purpose. And teams can be v- there's people I will meet in a few weeks time who will be horrified I am going to New Wine in the summer, because I should be loyal to Spring Harvest and I think that's wrong, but I don't th – I think actually, they are both doing the same thing.

Edwina: That's coming back to what [Ellie] said about discerning what's right and what you want here.

Edna: I went to Soul Survivor's Church for six months and, and there's lots of rivalry between them and HTB – umm, there's some church that HTB had planted and it hadn't going well, and Soul Survivor might be taking it over, and just the amount of gossip I heard about it, was awful, and I've no doubt it is exactly the same at HTB about Soul Survivor but it's terrible when you think [that] they are two of the biggest sort of um, road forming churches that we have in our culture and er, um, yeah, they are both, and that's not say that they all are, because I'm sure there are plenty of them that don't do that, but yeah, I certainly heard a lot of it whilst I was there.

Ellie: Quite sad, isn't it?

Differentiation between faith brands in this discussion was not always seen in negative terms – the example of Soul Survivor splitting from New Wine because of its growth in numbers and the need to see youth work as a distinct ministry was seen as a positive thing. The split between Spring Harvest and New Word Alive was seen as less positive. I would suggest this might be because the theological differences that lay behind the split (in 2008, after a widely reported disagreement around The Revd Steve Chalke's views on the nature of atonement), whilst being seen as quite significant by more conservative evangelicals, seemed less important than unity to this group of broader, more charismatic evangelicals.<sup>37</sup> One of the tensions inherent within the notion of branding faith within the Christian church is surely the difference between differentiation which is about reaching different people groups effectively – so New Wine is less focussed on young people than Soul Survivor (and Soul Survivor itself differentiates between teenagers and its “Momentum” 20s/30s ministry) – and

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<sup>37</sup>For more on the details of the split as reported by Christian news organisations at the time, see, e.g., <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2007/27-april/news/atonement-row-gets-personal-as-evangelical-partnership-splits> or <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/uccf.keswick.end.spring.harvest.word.alive.partnership/10506.htm> - both accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2014.

differentiation that is about disagreement, differing theological positions (though these vary in significance and intensity) or competition.

The question of why charismatic evangelicals might be more positive about faith brands may in part centre on a point that McGrath (1997:332) notes, which is that evangelicals often place less emphasis on traditional ecclesiology, and evangelicalism tends to function as a transdenominational movement. Evangelical Anglicans within a local setting might well consider they have as much or more in common spiritually with the Vineyard church down the road as they do with their neighbouring liberal or Anglo-Catholic Anglican parish. This would make faith brands more significant to them relative to their local church.

Evangelicalism's stress on personal conversion might also make it much more amenable to elements of Western (capitalist or free market) culture, with its focus on choice and the individual.<sup>38</sup>

Documentary analysis of New Wine's website quickly shows that they understand this and have sought to position themselves as an umbrella, or network within which churches and individuals who share their values (<http://www.new-wine.org/> [online]) can gather. Where this works well, it can be potentially fruitful – although as Vicar 2 noted, there is a danger that New Wine could talk about supporting the local church, but if a new movement is created by this, is this at the expense of someone's connection to the national or international church, both as an institution and as a Body? Simply regarding the Church of England (or any other denomination for that matter) as a good boat from which to fish is not an adequate ecclesiology.

Central to evangelicalism's transdenominational outlook is a shared focus on reaching others with the Gospel or Good News of Christ. When coupled with a theology that seeks to contextualise the message of the Gospel and present it in ways which are culturally relevant, it seems logical that this would be likely to lead to an increased likelihood of seeing faith brands as a positive thing in a consumer culture that embraces change and choice. Not all evangelicals would share this theology - there is a spectrum of belief in relation to this,

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<sup>38</sup> And possibly makes the rise of evangelicalism more readily explainable by theories such as RCT. Stark & Bainbridge (1985, 1987) and Stark & Finke (2000) certainly posit that the free market conditions in the US as opposed to the state-regulated religion of Europe are connected to the respective fortunes of religion remaining strong (in the US) and declining (in Europe). There are problems with their broadbrush application of the theory, however, as my summary at the end of chapter 2 of this thesis showed – see e.g., Gill (1993, 1999) and Bruce (1999).

and some would see it as compromising and potentially doctrinally dangerous (Benton, 2000). These are very general and initial reflections, in relation to a question that is complex and requires more research if it is to be properly addressed - as Miller's (2005) study of Christian faith and practice in consumer culture from his Roman Catholic perspective suggests. It is clear, however, not just from the data but also from the wider picture within the Church that evangelicals have embraced branding within the Church. One only needs to look at the proliferation of faith brands in a local Christian bookshop, consider Einstein's (2008) study of Alpha, Willow Creek and Purpose-Drive amongst others, or reflect on the explosion of Fresh Expressions over the past ten years since the publication of *Mission-Shaped Church*, to see that evangelicals in the UK have embraced the notion of differentiation with gusto (Church of England, Archbishop's Council, 2004; Croft, 2008).<sup>39</sup>

#### **4.2 – Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and data concerned with wider issues within the church and the world**

Differentiation is an interesting place to recall RCT, since one assertion of RCT is that greater differentiation or competition within a context will lead to a religious market which will eventually lead to increased religious engagement (Finke & Iannaccone, 1993; Iannaccone, 1997; Starke & Finke, 2000). This is in part because of the assumptions of RCT which see individuals as “naturally religious”, and ready to behave as spiritual shoppers if only they are allowed to do so. In this respect, Starke & Iannaccone (1994) are critical of the notion that Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century underwent a process of secularisation; the problem lay in a restricted, traditional religious market monopolised either by Roman Catholicism or various national Churches, as compared to the freer and more diversified religious market of the US. With increasing individual freedom and a more diverse religious market, religious revival may well soon occur. I have already critiqued these assumptions of RCT, and in addition, the empirical basis behind the claims has been robustly challenged (Chaves & Gorski, 2001; Voas, Olson & Crockett 2002; Norris &

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<sup>39</sup> And non-evangelicals of course – I do not wish to imply they are solely an evangelical phenomenon, but the evidence within the groups certainly appears to show that faith brands are particularly prevalent in evangelical church culture, and whilst I would want to acknowledge that Fresh Expressions come in different shapes, sizes and theologies, a majority of the initial energy for them within the Church of England, both from senior leadership and at the coal face has come from evangelicals.

Inglehart, 2004). The notion that simply increasing choice will lead to religious revival is seriously flawed when applied to a whole society. However, looking at the data, from this study it does appear that at a smaller level, faith brands have provided options in addition to traditional Church modes that have either encouraged participants to explore faith where they might not have done (such as Darren), enabled them to stay faithful to their local church despite their occasional frustrations at its shortcomings (such as Brian and Bernadette), or given them a wider context than their immediate family and local church background in which to explore and enact their faith (as in the case of Denzil, or Ed, as two examples). Not all the participants were positive about the proliferation of faith brands: discussions ranged from participants who felt unsure and uneasy in principle to those who were negative or critical of specific faith brands (Anne and Ailsa and their comments about Alpha, for example), although for practical reasons we do not have direct discussions with any people who have actually rejected faith because of faith brands. We also have cases like Cilla or Camilla, who were definitely unsure about their experiences of Billy Graham and New Wine, but also reflected that there were nevertheless positive aspects to those encounters; as well as Celia's recognition, following Camilla's reflections on how different people respond to different styles of music and different worship leaders (Matt Redman, Tim Hughes, Graham Kendrick) within worship:

*Celia: It's interesting isn't it? What turns one person on turns another person off..*

This is very similar to Edie's earlier observation that "different churches fit different people." What is helpful to note in relation to faith brands is that from the perspective of RCT, differentiation – for whatever reason it happens – is desirable. Arguably, one might suggest a potential theological warrant for such a proposition in the Apostle Paul's comment about disagreeing factions with mixed motives preaching the Gospel in the opening chapter of Philippians:

*Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill... What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice." (cf Phil 1:13-18a)*



However, whilst Paul might resort to hyperbole in his rhetoric on occasion, taken in context it is impossible to believe that he would seriously countenance such a pragmatic abandonment of theological principle to be enshrined within the missionary strategy of the church – as Dunn’s (1998) study of Paul’s missionary theology makes clear. One must not mistake Paul’s desire to encourage a church struggling with differing factions as a statement of policy. Leaving aside debates about the relationship between *Charisma* and *Amt*, or the exact nature of apostles, prophets and teachers (Ridderbos, 1975:439f), Paul is clear not only about his own authority but also that the character and methods of ministers of the gospel, and churches, need to be beyond reproach and done in good order (Dunn, 1998:580ff; see, e.g. 1 Cor 11-13; 1 & 2 Tim). And this is to say nothing of the teaching of Christ, nor the wider witness of other New Testament writers in addition.

RCT may emphasise some positive aspects of differentiation even if it overpresses its case in relation to society as a whole. However, the concerns about theological pragmatism, reductionism and compromise that have been raised in relation to faith brands cannot simply be brushed aside if we are to evaluate their impact not just on individuals, but also the wider Church. This will necessarily include reflections on the difference between diversity in terms of form – style and aesthetics - and content, or theology. The relationship of the medium to the message seems central. Inevitably, many of these kinds of issues have been covered in contemporary debates about the Homogenous Unit Principle and Fresh Expressions literature.<sup>40</sup> We now turn to the issues that will form the agenda for theological reflection.

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<sup>40</sup> The Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) and Fresh Expressions (FX) will be explained and discussed in depth in chapter 6 of this thesis; but refer to a missionary methodology that targets and tailors church for specific cultural groups. For a brief introduction to each, see McGavran (1955), and Cray et al, ed., (1994).

### **4.3 - Faith brands and the wider Church – some issues to explore**

The church cannot engage in marketing. The church cannot put itself on a pedestal, create itself, praise itself. One cannot serve God while at the same time covering oneself by serving the devil and the world. – Karl Barth

We shouldn't be surprised then that religion – whether in the form of a film or a church – is being marketed in the current commercialized culture. In order to be heard above the noise of the rest of society, religion, too, must participate in order to survive. – Mara Einstein

(Both cited in Stolz & Usunier, 2014:3)

Do faith brands necessarily compromise the values of the gospel through their very existence? There are undoubtedly dangers in branding faith, as Albert's fear about presenting a reductionist account of Christian faith – and, by implication, of God – illustrate. On the other hand, the marketing professional who was interviewed did not see any necessary clash between the values of the Gospel and the use of some marketing techniques within the Church (unsurprisingly, we might add - although she did not advocate an uncritical embrace). In fact, she suggested that marketing has always gone on – it is just that we have more of a language for it now:

*Marketing expert 1: I think it [marketing and branding the church] is quite a positive thing – because I think the church has quite a job on its hands to compete with all the social activities that can take or attract people's time to them...*

*CH: Do you think it [marketing] raises any ethical issues for the church?*

*Marketing expert 1: Um - No, I think as long as it's transparent about what it's doing then it doesn't raise any issues...branding is no more than a, um, useful set of tools to help it, um, create perceptions – and it's nothing more sophisticated than that, and why shouldn't the church use it if it's going to help bring people in?*

*Marketing expert 1: Surely it's as simple as trying to make the church open to people – and I don't think there's anything wrong with it, although that's a personal perception. I'd argue that the church has actually been branded for years and years and years and centuries and centuries, it's just we today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a set of concepts known as branding, and er, you know, we*

*have some understandings around what creates branding, brand perception, brand values, but we've probably been doing it intuitively for years.*

A glance back at the history and development of branding set out in the introduction to this thesis (1.1) supports this contention. The words also remind us about Dee's earlier point – that marketing is about communicating with people. In fact, as the Groups reflected on it, they didn't see branding as wholly negative – Group A remarked that whilst Billy Graham was not entirely to their taste, he did create opportunities for the wider Church by bringing faith into the public sphere. Adam also argued that there was a need for faith exploration courses these days, since simply coming to church on a Sunday would not be enough for people to learn the basics of faith and grow if, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they were coming to church for the first time without a whole background of growing up within the church.

It is clear from the data in the focus groups that whilst for some participants faith brands have not made a huge impact on them, for others faith brands have impacted the development of their faith. Sometimes this has been in very positive ways – such as Brian and Bernadette's engagement in New Wine, which has reinvigorated their faith. Some participants had less positive experiences. Even then, however, engagement with faith brands has at least enabled participants to reflect on their faith journey. From the data we have examined so far, it might be tentatively suggested that where faith courses or festivals are adapted sensitively to a local context, and where participants engaging with them are given space for reflection and questioning on their faith journey, faith brands can be a helpful and positive aspect of Church life, and beneficial to Christian faith.

However, this does not fully deal with some of the clear questions that have been raised in relation to reductionism and ecclesiology. I want to suggest that the data we have looked at suggests that faith brands can be both beneficial *and* harmful to Christian faith. Some participants have had positive experiences of faith brands, others have had negative experiences. However, the evidence from our focus group participants appears to show that on balance, Christian faith brands can be more beneficial than harmful where practitioners are sensitive to their context, and the ways in which their faith brands offer ways to engage with Christian faith.

Einstein (2008:209) appears correct when she argues that there is nothing inherently wrong with creating faith brands, or with faiths employing marketing techniques. In her analysis she argues that there are plenty of churches doing great good, and that religious seekers are not usually spiritual dupes – when people make choices about their truth systems, they are not flippant about their choices. As Lyon (2000:77) argues:

While much in consumer culture may well be transient, ephemeral, inconsequential, this does not necessarily mean that those qualities feature prominently, let alone exclusively, in the religious decisions confronted in the course of accomplishing individual self-identities... “switchers” who move from one denomination to another do so on the basis of spiritual and moral choice rather than for more cynical reasons; it is religious change, sometimes conversion, that prompts such moves.

The stories that have emerged from the focus groups bear this out. Faith brands can be helpful in this process. However, by the same token, as Einstein reminds us, there are dangers. Religion (and faith brands) cannot become so *of* the market that it loses its unique selling proposition – its ability to raise one *above* the market. Faith brands show that consumerism has become a characteristic of religious discourse in the Western world, but consumerism doesn’t have to be the defining characteristic. Faith brands can be a characteristic means for bringing people to faith without becoming the faith itself. To pick up on our earlier observation, perhaps precisely because faith brands are understood to be somewhat artificially/humanly created, they allow for some critical distance that might be more difficult in relation to “the Faith” itself.

In order to do this, however, they need to negotiate the dangers of branding faith. To this end, our next chapter will explore a number of concerns that have been raised about branding the Church. These will include:

- the charge that branding faith might run the risk of presenting a reductionist account of God; or stifle people’s faith exploration and actually harm the mission of the church.
- the concern that as faith brands grow Christians may well find themselves worshipping and identifying in more homogenous churches, and the issues this might raise for discipleship, particularly vis à vis Fresh Expressions and the Homogenous Unit Principle. While enculturating the Gospel might well be understood as an

appropriate response to Christ's Great Commission (cf. Matt 28:16-20), without proper reflection (and in a worst case scenario) these expressions and brands of faith could end up mirroring rather than challenging unhelpful aspects of consumer culture. Does branding faith compromise the message?

- in relation to this – as Ward (1998) has reflected, what ethical, theological and mission praxis questions are raised by the adoption of a franchise model to enable faith brands to be more easily adopted by different churches?
- the questions that branding faith poses to traditional modes of church and structures of church authority and accountability – what do faith brands do to ecclesiology, and how should we understand them in relation to the local church?
- the concern that faith brands might stifle rather than help innovation and creativity; and the relationship between larger churches or parachurch faith brands and smaller, more locally geographic expressions of church.
- the question of where all this fits in with a scriptural understanding – in Bosch's (1998) terms, "within what kind of mission paradigm might we understand faith brands?" What models might we find within scripture, and what might a theology of faith brands look like?

It is to the first of the above questions that we now turn.

## **5. Reductionism v Relevance and Branding Faith – utilizing a medium without compromising a message? Alpha Explored.**

A number of concerns about faith brands have emerged from the analysis of the focus group data. In this chapter, looking particularly at the Alpha course, we will explore the dangers that faith brands might risk presenting a reductionist account of God or narrow people's exploration of Christian faith.

### **5.1 – The Alpha Course and the danger of reductionism**

Is there a risk that branding faith might run the risk of presenting a reductionist account of God? Ailsa's experience of Alpha, and the reservations of many in Group A to Alpha demonstrated a concern that faith brands might present their particular vision of faith in a totalising way – neatly summed up in Albert's concern about branding really only covering a small part of the Christian faith at any one time:

*Albert: Is there also a danger with what branding actually is – it, when you take - if you think about this sort of idea, this thesis of branding of faith, you actually only brand a little bit of it at any one time there's none of these brands are all-encompassing, anybody who - well all of us would say "well, faith is this wide" but your brands only look at a tiny bit of it and sell the product as "this is what it is", and I think I would not want to feel like I felt that way, because I don't feel that way...*

In the above excerpt, Albert clearly has in mind faith-branded introductions to the Christian faith, of which there are many these days – Start, the Y Course, Christianity Explored, Emmaus, Credo, Essence, and Alpha to name a few (for a summary/critique of some of these see Booker & Ireland, 2003). In fact, the discussion emerged following on from Ailsa's comments about Alpha, and since Alpha is the course that participants in other groups spoke about having experience of, we will focus on Alpha as we explore this question, but with reference to principles that might apply to the question of faith branded exploration courses in general.

We have already seen Brian's (2010) criticism of Alpha for primarily "recycling" existing believers – turning them not from non-believers into believers but from one sort of Christian into a more "Charismatic" sort. Brian argues that Alpha has presented a narrow, reductionist account of Christianity, and that there is a danger that people who are not enthused by Christian faith as proposed by the Alpha course materials might be put off Christianity altogether, even though there might well be other branches of Christianity that they might otherwise have happily espoused or explore. Percy (1997; 2001) has praised Alpha for not being "hit and run" evangelism, being situated in local churches and including supportive literature for enquirers, but criticised the content of the course, especially its weak ecclesiology, over-emphasis on the Holy Spirit (and criticising Alpha's pneumatology itself, being in his view an individualistic, personal, therapeutic, home counties presentation of the Spirit). Percy contends the course is weak on sin, suffering, atonement, sacraments and sacrifice, that the basics should include more on the trinity, baptism, communion and community. Percy also complains that participants on Alpha have little space to reflect on and vent their personal concerns. Significantly, Percy (1997; 2001) makes these points about Alpha through an analysis of its source materials, rather than having been present on a course itself – analysis of participants of Alpha courses diverges on this last point, with some (such as Alisa) agreeing but others (such as our Group D members, or participants from the Alpha course I interviewed in my aforementioned earlier study) suggesting it was the space and openness of the course that was most helpful to them. Heard (2009) suggests that course experiences can vary hugely depending on the personality, theology and facilitating skills of group leaders.

Bockmuehl's (1998) response to Percy (1997) notes that many of his arguments – weak ecclesiology and neglecting the sacraments – have been made against evangelicalism in general. There is, nevertheless, some truth in his critique – there is little about sacraments in the course itself, unless one participates in the adapted Roman Catholic edition of the course. Arguably, this omission may well have made it easier to adapt the course across the ecumenical Roman Catholic-Protestant divide, with the Roman Catholic Church simply adding in some additional material and presenting the course as it is, rather than having to adapt or edit out aspects from each session. Bockmuehl rightly disputes many of Percy's unsubstantiated comments about Alpha participants failing to become church members, and the fact that Percy's accusation of evangelicalism's lack of a social conscience ignores the

tradition's long history of social engagement (and, I would add, the contemporary reality today, where much of the church's social action is being spearheaded by evangelical churches, including, for example, HTB's own work with Besom – see Brookes, 2007:434). Bockmuehl points to a contradiction in Percy's critique that Alpha both offers an uncontextual Christianity and also has a home counties/middle class outlook – Percy has clearly located Alpha's HTB context. Bockmuehl misses the point, however, that HTB's *lebenswelt* has then been pre-packaged and copyrighted to make local adaptation very limited. Rooms' (2005) study of three Alpha courses, suggests (similarly to Percy) that although the process aspect of Alpha is well delivered, as a course it is theologically narrow, makes too many assumptions about where participants might be in their theological understanding before they begin the course, and that the copyrighting of the course limits its effectiveness and flexibility in different contexts.

Bockmuehl is also critical of Percy's distaste for "basic" catechesis, pointing out that at least Alpha helps people to join some of the dots of the faith – Alpha is a starting point, not an end point. He does not comment, however, on an important aspect of Percy's argument, which is about authority – who chooses what the basics that constitute the Christian faith are? Why are certain basics included and others omitted? This again relates to HTB's theology and context, and picks up on Brian's (2010) concern that Alpha is not really, as it bills itself, "An opportunity to explore the meaning of life" (Gumbel, 1993) but rather, "An opportunity to explore the meaning of life from a charismatic-evangelical, ethically conservative point of view", whilst all the time painting itself as normative Christianity.

Hunt's (2001; 2004) analysis supports Brian's (2010) notion that Alpha is failing to engage non-Christians, arguing that although Alpha does bring in those already on the fringe of the church its main impact has been in renewing the faith of existing church members and again, promoting charismatic Christian faith – although he does note in his observations about HTB church plants that some of these might make the journey into being a "post-charismatic" church (2004:253). As Booker & Ireland (2003:17) observe, a major weakness in Hunt's analysis is that it is mainly sociological rather than theological; his argument for maintaining that Alpha is failing to convert people to Christianity is based on the assumption that because most people who come on a course have had some involvement with the Church already, they are practising Christians. However, if we accept with Finney (1992),



and as our earlier data analysis suggests, that faith is a journey in which people often “belong before they believe”, it may well be the case that although they have already travelled some way on their journey of faith before they sign up to Alpha, their time on the course is nevertheless crucial as part of that process. Heard (2009), has questioned Hunt in this regard - and perhaps cheekily, but interestingly, points out that whilst Hunt portrayed himself as an agnostic in his first research project, he now admits that he is continuing to attend a church cell group – might Hunt himself be an example of this “journey of faith” phenomenon? Added to this, from the data in this study, Alpha has clearly had a positive effect either on the gradual faith journeys of our participants, and in the case of Darren on the decision to make a commitment/conversion. It is impossible to make generalisations about the full variety of people who attend Alpha courses on the basis of a sample as small as the one in this study, but Darren’s conversion and the stories and faith stage of several of those in Group D in particular would suggest that there is enough evidence out there to challenge Brian’s (2010) assertion that Alpha is not engaging those outside the church, although it is undoubtedly true that the entry point for Darren was connected to pre-existing relationships with members of the church, as well as his life experiences and his experience of the numinous whilst sitting in the George Chapel eating his lunch eat day during the period when he was painting and working on the interior of the church building.

Hunt (2004) is also concerned that the Charismatic movement (and Alpha in particular) display many of the dynamics of secularisation by resonating so closely with aspects of contemporary culture – such as the offer of “choice”. This seems unfair – as Heard (2009) and Dulles (1999) point out, Christian apologists have often drawn from their intellectual surroundings to present the reasonableness of Christian belief. Secularisation is not as simple or straightforward a process as Hunt would assert.

In contrast to Hunt and Brian, Brierley’s (2000) research suggests that Alpha does reach non-church members, and has a positive impact on church size. Brierley’s study contends that churches running Alpha are less likely to show decline in attendance compared to an average UK church, particularly when they have been running it for three or more years, where churches become increasingly likely to see numerical growth. Brierley argues that the reason for this is that where churches run Alpha for only one or two years, many of those who take part tend to be church members; churches often see a drop in the numbers

participating in Alpha after their second course, but the mix of participants is more heavily weighted to non-Christians. Brierley argues that Churches running courses for more than three years must be attracting non-Christians, otherwise they would have stopped running them by then. Unsurprisingly, Gumbel (2004) backs Brierley's research, and argues that Alpha is a long-term church growth strategy; Booker & Ireland (2005) also suggest that the statistics seem to correlate with Brierley's theory. Heard (2009), whilst acknowledging the statistics, is more cautious about stressing a definite "causal link" between running Alpha and church growth. Heard does not dispute that Alpha churches in the UK do appear to have a numerical edge over non-Alpha churches, but in a sense suggests that there is potentially something of a chicken and egg relationship here – as Freebury (2001:69) points out, rather than running Alpha growing a church, it might simply be the case that growing churches run Alpha.

## ***5.2 – Arguments about Alpha considered – “a lot depends on who is leading it”***

If the above paints a confused or contradictory picture, it is unsurprising – there are significant differences in people's view both of the theology of the Alpha Course, and also their experience of different courses.

The data from the groups is mixed, but for the clear majority who have had actual experience of the course Alpha made a positive contribution to the development of their faith. This was not universal - for Ailsa in Group A, her experience was negative and felt somewhat closed in terms of exploration. Her comment that she “was told I wasn't a proper Christian because I was questioning” and her conviction about the importance of having “the freedom to doubt” were central to this – although later in the focus group it became clear that that this was in fact caused by a fellow participant, rather than the course leaders. Nevertheless, the experience proved harmful to her, and the group leaders had not picked up on this or mitigated it by the end of the course, with the result that she would not go on one again or recommend it to others.

However, against, this, for Group D participants for example, as we saw in chapter 3, the experience was much more positive. Diane talked about liking the branding for Alpha, and suggested that the Alpha brand provided a kind of security and consistency which would

enable her to feel secure in recommending it to others because she felt “you know what you are going to get”; she talked about being able to “recommend it to people without getting too heavy”, perhaps an interesting reference again to RCT’s notion of “preserving social capital” – Diane wanted to participate in sharing her faith, but without unnecessarily jeopardising her relationships with people (Iannacone, 1997).

To the charge of theological narrowness – it is certainly true that the theology expressed within the syllabus of the Alpha Course is Charismatic Evangelical. Alpha is not alone among Christian faith brands by any means in being a course purporting to be an introduction to Christian faith that nevertheless has a strong link to a particular strand of Christian spirituality – Christianity Explored, whilst rooted in the Gospel of Mark, is undeniably exploring faith from a conservative evangelical perspective, whilst Credo, for example, is more rooted in a Catholic spirituality. To some extent, any short course will end up being open to a charge of reductionism or narrowness – how does one explore the vastness of the Christian faith in a manageable way within a few weeks? In many respects, this highlights the fact that any introduction to Christian faith will be particularised – any notion that a generic presentation of the gospel can be offered is simply false and out of line with a doctrine of creation, which necessitates being realistic about the temporal and limited nature (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and complex fallenness of the world. Alpha will always be particularised, not simply through the selection of materials by its creators at HTB, but also through the personality and decision-making of the leaders who utilise it at local level. One wonders what Alpha’s critics are looking for? A less conservative or charismatic introduction to faith, most likely – to which proponents of Alpha could respond that this is simply particularising the gospel in a different way.

That said, as Booker & Ireland (2005:46) observe, it is possible to be broader than Alpha whilst retaining a focus on exploring faith - Emmaus is cited as one example of how it is possible to design an effective evangelism course that is both broader than Alpha and utilises a wider variety of learning styles (another common criticism of Alpha, although not one that our focus groups touched upon – despite the fact that the participants did not appear to be drawn from identical educational backgrounds, although I would need to gain additional data about them to say so for sure).

In addition to this, as we noted earlier, with any faith course there will be an inherent tension between wanting to create an open space to explore but also to lead people to see the truth of Christian faith. Fowler's (1981 & 1987) work on the stages of faith development suggests this tension is not necessarily a problem, but clearly participants will need to be handled appropriately in relation to their own journey. One aspect of this that would have been interesting to have explored in a larger study would have been how this tension between openness and wanting to demonstrate the truthfulness of aspects of Christian faith varies depending on the theology and personality of the church or individual who is running the course – and the course itself. It is simply not possible to generalise on the basis of a study of this size. What we can say, however, is that the key to managing the tension is clearly located in how the brand materials are used by the local church, and in the skills and sensitivity of the church leaders and small group leaders. Our documentary analysis of the Alpha training resources shows that Alpha specifically instructs group leaders to be non-judgemental and not to criticise other churches or traditions within Christianity (Gumbel 1994; 2003). Einstein (2008:108) observes that this is seen by HTB as a key aspect of the course – the leader is “not there to say that this is the right answer” but to “facilitate discussion”. Gumbel (2007:431) himself argues that “evangelism is more than just an intellectual approach, it is about experiencing community for a start, Christian community.” That may be so, but within the boundaries of Christian community the intellectual exploration does nevertheless need to be sufficiently robust. Heard (2009) argues that the small group leadership might well be the least consistent aspect of the Alpha experience:

The most unpredictable part of Alpha was the small group discussion, and it was in this area that the greatest problems occurred. I suggested that one of the reasons for this was Gumbel's deferral of the more difficult questions to the small group, with leaders lacking formal theological training. Further, Gumbel's vision of guests answering their own questions foundered when these more complex issues were tackled. On the whole, leaders were unable to assimilate the participatory style of leadership that Gumbel outlines. Small group leadership requires sensitive interpersonal skills that are not easily acquired in two or three Alpha training sessions. (Heard, 2009:232)

We might posit that what having weak small group leaders really indicates is that local churches may either fail to heed the small group discussion guidelines within the Alpha training materials, or that they do not select and equip their leaders thoughtfully enough. Sometimes poor group leaders may prevent broader theological exploration; on the other

hand, others may be too vague and leave complex questions unanswered. Certainly, if they lack sensitivity they might well either be unaware or fail to reassure group members when unhelpful exchanges between participants take place – which would certainly tie in to Ailsa’s unhappy experience. However, those in Group D clearly had a much more positive Alpha small group experience than those observed by Heard, and had made the journey from the Alpha course to a church small group where they were continuing to explore their faith (again, significant, because another criticism Heard noted in his study was a lack of specific post-Alpha follow-up – Heard, 2009:234). In this respect, much of the criticism of Alpha’s theology misses the point that the success of the course often lies in the process itself (Heard, 2009:233; Rooms, 2005).

In an exchange in Group D about the importance of the dialogue between the brand and how it was applied locally there was a recognition that, in Diane’s words, a lot “depends on who is leading it”. From the rest of the focus group data, but also from the other studies we have been discussing, Diane appears to have hit the nail on the head – much indeed does depend on who is leading Alpha and how it is used. It is asking an awful lot of any faith course to provide all the answers or enable people to make the full journey from enquiry to commitment. Darren’s comment hints at what being in this kind of process might feel like to a participant at the end of the course:

*Darren: I didn’t leave the course and think that “this is it” or anything – (group yeahs, mmms) - I just think it kind of opened the door for me a bit, it just let me in – (more group yeahs, mmms) - like before, I might not have made that move...*

Used sensitively in partnership with a relational local church ministry, the Alpha brand can significantly augment the journeys of individuals. The evidence appears to be that if this is done, it does minimise the weaknesses of the course structure and theology; and that it is possible to create good small group dynamics and also to ensure that relationships are built upon and followed up as part of a longer, wider process of faith development. As Bockmuehl (1998) argues, Alpha is an important starting point, but it is only a starting point – a place to begin “joining the dots”. In a sense, this is what Alpha International have always argued for – Gumbel has never suggested that Alpha as a complete process in and of itself,

and has encouraged churches to use it in whichever way fits best with their existing methods and patterns of ministry (Brookes, 2007:433f).

### **5.3 - Alpha, Faith brands and the issues raised by McDonaldisation.**

Continuing our exploration of the criticisms levelled at the Alpha course, one key one concern relates to the tension between the centralised, Alpha brand and the opportunity for local adaptation.

HTB encourage local practitioners to adapt their courses to their context – again giving an opportunity to mitigate against some of the perceived weaknesses of the course – but only in a limited way in relation to form, rather than core content, which is protected by copyright warnings. The exchange with Gumbel, below, neatly encapsulates this tension:

AB: Alpha has been standardised – and good reasons can be given for this. Put in the briefest way, it is important to “follow the recipe” to understand how the course really works. But with standardisation you have the opportunity for advertising and for the national campaigns. But set against that, this puts limits on flexibility in changing the course and, some would say, really addressing local mission issues regarding the local culture. Any comments on the balance of all this?

NG: Yeah! You understand the reason why we have it the same – so that we can go out to the country and say it is an opportunity to explore the meaning of life at a church near you and it is the same thing. You couldn’t do that if it was different things because no-one would know what they are getting.

As far as local flexibility is concerned – every church can run it. They can have their own speakers; be giving their own talks and they have their own small group leaders – so the questions in the small groups will be different. The worship will be different, the food will be different, the décor will be different. It’s going to be completely different and every church has the possibility of adapting it to the local culture.

The only thing we say it please keep the essential character of the course if you are going to call it Alpha. If you want to do something that is essentially different please do not call it Alpha. But, of course, any church can run any course they want. They don’t have to run Alpha – they can run any course they want. All we are saying is if you are going to *call* it Alpha it is a bit misleading for people who are sending their friends if you are running something that is essentially different. That is the only thing we say – “to keep the essential character of the course”. But the worship, the small group, the speaker, everything else can be different.  
(in Brookes, 2007:433f)

This tension was highlighted memorably by Ward (1998) who, drawing on Ritzer (1996) critiqued the “franchise model” of the Alpha course.<sup>41</sup> Ritzer (1996:1) contends that McDonald’s offer “consumers, workers and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.” In this respect, Ward argues that Alpha does the same, fits with today’s consumerist mindset and can be seen as a significant contextualisation of the methods of evangelism. Like McDonald’s, Alpha operates on a global franchising system; it has a recognisable “product” with a strong brand; the central organisation of Alpha retains fairly strict social controls on franchisees; it has global ambitions and both Alpha and McDonald’s have spawned imitations.

For Ward (1998), efficiency is present in Alpha in the packaging of material for easy use, making the gospel accessible to today’s culture. Calculability is about size and quantity, and found in the predilection for numbers found in Alpha News – Alpha has “internalised the values of McDonaldization where quantity is self-evident proof of significance and numbers sell.” (Ward, 1998:282). Predictability is found, as in McDonald’s, through offering a consistent product in a safe and familiar environment, wherever you are in the world. This has enabled McDonald’s to achieve both ubiquity and transnational similarity. Ward notes that this predictability in McDonald’s extends even to the scripting of interactions between workers and customers, and that for a church lacking evangelistic experience, Alpha offers a reassuringly predictable package, with multiple resources and uniform branding. By doing so, the anxieties and uncertainties associated with outreach are reduced; for the participant, this is experienced as “non-threatening-religion” – or, we might say, soft-selling (Ward, 1998:283). Control is expressed, as we have seen, through the Alpha resources and the copyrighting of the Alpha brand. Ward notes that “to buy into Alpha is to do it the Alpha way. Alpha thus becomes the cultural producer and the creative force.”

As Booker & Ireland (2005:21) observe, there is certainly a parallel between Alpha and McDonald’s, with their fairly limited menu reproduced the world over. There are upsides to McDonaldisation – with consistency comes an opportunity to focus marketing and awareness of the course nationally and internationally, with huge poster

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<sup>41</sup> See also Drane’s (2000) application of the MacDonaldisation thesis to religion in his critique of the production side of consumer religion.

and even TV advertising campaigns. One could equally argue that the *Book of Common Prayer* represented the McDonaldisation of liturgy and worship in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Ward's (1998) critique is constructively-critical; he is clear from the beginning that he considers that "God is at work in and through Alpha" but that at the same time it would be foolish to ignore the cultural and social organisation that gives shape to it – "to say 'God is at work' does not preclude the possibility of cultural analysis of religious phenomena. Indeed a theology of Incarnation would demand both theological and social scientific perspectives." (Ward, 1998:279). To that end, whilst affirming the work of Alpha, he offers a number of critical points for concern which arise from his analysis of the culture of Alpha in terms of McDonaldisation.

To start with, Ward registers concern about the simplification of religion and the flattening out of complexity, although acknowledges that Alpha is okay as a starting point as long as it does not become an end point. He notes the danger of the "iron cage" of Alpha – one of the classic critiques of rationalisation being that it tends to create systems that bind people, stifle creativity and from which they eventually try to escape – as Weber (1905, 2010) famously noted. For many Christians the gospel is experienced as a call to creativity and quirky endeavour in the power of the Spirit, which the McDonaldisation of religion might be in danger of suppressing. This links to the dangers of a uniform spirituality imposing a kind of religious imperialism – in much the same way as McDonald's is held up as an example of American cultural imperialism, and a concern he has about "the illusion of religion". Just as McDonaldisation leads to an illusion of neatness and cleanness (Disneyworld – glitzy and exciting, but fake) Alpha offers those from outside the church an experience of the faith which also has a measure of unreality. Membership of the church, regular Sunday worship and so on are simply not like being on an Alpha course.

Finally, Alpha offers "convenience mission" – at a cultural level, Alpha has "simplified" evangelism to a predictable process. The upside of this is that individual Christians have felt encouraged that they can play a part in this by inviting their neighbours and friends. The downside of this is that "convenience mission" might downplay commitment – not in the sense of the explicit theology of Alpha, because commitment to Christ, the church and the evangelistic process are key to what Alpha propose – but



downplaying implicit commitment in a different way. McDonaldisation is designed for individuals on the move who are concerned to minimise commitments, and there is a danger that Alpha may convince church members that by taking part in it somehow periodically they are “doing their bit”, and in so doing contribute to them losing sight of the fact that Christian mission is a much broader and significantly more costly endeavour than simply running an Alpha course. In sum, Ward argues, Alpha is a work of God but it is also a religious cultural industry offering product to consumers, which in the Church of England brings challenges and opportunities – not least, a dynamic where power has shifted from Episcopal hierarchies and synodical government towards the market, changing the nature of religious life in the process. (Ward, 1998:285f).

In part, Gumbel counters the charge of McDonaldisation by rejecting the notion that Alpha creates monochrome Christians and stressing that diversity comes through particular denominational follow-up – although as Heard (2009:66) rightly observes, this fails to answer the question about Alpha itself. And as Booker & Ireland (2005:22) note, many churches fail to include post-Alpha follow up in their planning – a significant flaw in Gumbel’s defence, although arguably not one he is responsible for. Linking also to the issue of social justice, they observe that if HTB are aware that Alpha needs to be just one part of holistic mission, then it is important that they do their best to ensure local churches get the message.

In a way, this highlights one of the issues with McDonaldisation – in a busy world, when things come pre-packaged it is just too easy to rely on them rather than putting thought and effort in. Vicar 2, whilst very positive about the Alpha course, certainly saw the dangers of this in relation to faith brands:

*Vicar 2: They’ve become an easy option, so there is a slight mentality which I am a bit distrustful of...um...of, um, the current church in a time, in a climate of crisis, saying, looking for solutions and looking to pre-conceived products, trusted because they come from recognised brands as the solution to the local pro-the local need, um...which is investing too much confidence in them...and it’s probably an unhelpful device, so there has become a little bit of a movement from one brand to the next – so, “we did purpose driven church, no, work?*

*No, we'll go to seeker-sensitive Willow Creek stuff, um, that hasn't worked so we'll try Alpha, um, oooh we'll try a little bit of fresh expression on the side, and er, and we'll do it all in a cafe..." (laugh) – so it's att – it's – we're concerned that it's a short cut – possibly a short cut and avoiding the hard miles of incarnating the gospel in a particular community...and there's a lie, in a way – being really harsh and perhaps incendiary, but I will say it, there's a lie that adherence to the brand, that adherence to the brand can transform and incarnate the gospel in a local community or whatever and revitalise the life of the church. And there is then, and that's important because, the brand becomes something, because it is a genuine response - a genuine response to the working of the Spirit, um...that's what's enabled this thing to emerge which then become, needs a label to describe it that's enabled it to become a brand, um...and we sometimes mistake the packaging and the product for the creator God who has invested the thing with any eternal significance in the first place.*

Vicar 2 highlights that when faith courses come pre-packaged – McDonaldised – there is a danger not only that they might prevent broader exploration on the part of the participants, but also that they might tempt churches and church leaders to take short cuts or to lose the discipline of reflexivity and theological reflection in relation to mission in their context. In the long term, this would be disastrous for the church and actually de-skill Christians at local level (Meadows, 2007). One might posit that it is especially tempting to look for short cuts and conveniently packaged courses if you are a busy, hard-pressed vicar. And yet, within the words of Vicar 2 there is also a tension between recognising that problem and also acknowledging a conviction that God has nevertheless somehow been the inspiration behind whatever created the brand. In wrestling with this, he was clear that it is not the brand's fault that it might be misused – the key, once more in Diane's words, "depends on those who are leading it" – in other words, it lies with how the brand materials are deployed in context (and to some extent too, with the brand in making people aware of its own limitations):

*Vicar 2: ...it's the users of the brand that need to be redeemed...so the brand needs to come with the right warning on the packaging, doesn't it? Which, to be fair, which to be fair, I'm sure the brand owners would subscribe to....[ ]...it's the sense that it's our, it's the users' responsibility to be responsive to God's Spirit in their investigation, prayerful consideration and*

*then adaptation and then implementation of whatever it means to use or belong to, to take on this brand association.*

These insights and Gumbel's earlier comments serve as apt reminders that whatever criticism one might wish to level at a particular faith brand, it is local church leaders, with their theology and praxis, who are in the end responsible for how brands such as Alpha are utilised. Stackhouse (2004) and Peterson (1986, 1987, and particularly, 1989) comment insightfully both on the dangers of an insecure church succumbing to McDonaldisation's linked idolatry – faddism – and also the danger of the importance of organisational and management skills being over-emphasised in ministry in the modern church at the cost of a minister's role in serving as a spiritual director for their congregation. It is not a bad thing for course materials to be convenient and easy to understand and use – but it becomes a problem when convenience becomes the overriding factor in decision making. That said, the conversations with both group members and our vicars revealed a high level of awareness of the potential triumphs and pitfalls involved. Vicar I was clear that Alpha has its place, but was clear that “the best way to view Alpha is part of a process...rather than just being a course you go on.” For vicar I the relationships, formed through the hospitality, the asking of questions, the experiential side of prayer were all important, but crucially, it was seen as one part of a wider process of befriending and engaging people to draw them into membership.

Booker & Ireland (2005) suggest that part of the success of Alpha lies in its McDonaldisation - the size of the promotion and marketing.<sup>42</sup> There is certainly some evidence that some people from outside the church are attracted to Alpha courses in part because they have heard of it. Vicar I in particular agreed that Alpha had the “biggest footprint” of all faith brands and a strong, national profile. This perhaps demonstrates the power of branding in grabbing attention and creating awareness in culture in a way that local churches perhaps struggle to – as with McDonald's, ubiquity gives explorers a confidence in trying Alpha out, or perhaps helps foster a curiosity about what Alpha is all about. From a pragmatic perspective, we might argue it is better for the church to have people coming on an imperfect evangelistic course and

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<sup>42</sup> Booker & Ireland also note that Emmaus might have a larger impact upon the church if only they had utilised branding methodology more keenly (2005:29).

use that opportunity to build relationships than to run a more rounded non-branded course with fewer members, although the long term dangers of pragmatism are recognised in the caution of vicar 2 above. If a McDonaldised course doesn't always fit snugly into every local context, McDonaldisation is certainly relevant to our national context in a Western capitalist society – although that is not necessarily the case when exporting it round the world.

#### **5.4 – McDonaldised brands and the problem of contextualising the Gospel**

Heard (2009:222) agrees that Alpha fits with today's consumerist mindset and in that sense can be seen as a significant contextualisation of evangelism. However, using Schreiter (1986) and Luzbetak's (1988) notion that contextualisation broadly falls into three levels – *translation*, *adaptation* and *inculturation* – Heard argues that a fundamental weakness of Alpha (at local level) is that its contextualisation stops at *translation* and fails to carry through into full *inculturation*.<sup>43</sup> This is, in large part, because of a positivist understanding of culture, and the assumption that the gospel is acultural – a kernel, surrounded by a husk of culture, two clearly separable elements - rather than religion being by definition a cultural system that is integrally linked to culture. Bosch (2003:421) argues this is because of a Greek metaphysic in which ideas are considered prior and more important than “application” – an approach which received a new lease of life during the Enlightenment in Kant's paradigm where, for example, “pure reason” is considered superior to “practical reason.” This served to legitimise the right of the Church to decide determine the “objective” truth of the Bible, and direct the application of timeless truths to the everyday lives of believers. But as Shorter (1994) argues, you cannot neatly separate religion and culture in that way:

We do not live in a world of essences, nor do magisterial faith statements arise in some privileged supracultural sphere; rather, the Gospel travels throughout history from one inculturated form to another. (Shorter, 1994:231).

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<sup>43</sup> Heard recognises that these categories must not be viewed in an absolute sense (2009:223); and focuses on *translation* and *inculturation*, arguing that *adaptation* incorporates varying degrees of contextualisation seen in the other two (Schreiter, 1986). He also notes a more positive assessment of translation in Walls (2002) and Sannah (2004); Sannah in particular suggests that the missionary adoption of the vernacular included radical indiginisation, and thus de-absolutised any attempt of conceiving one cultural form as “the” expression of Christian faith. This being so, however, leads Heard to conclude (rightly, in my view) that such an approach challenges the so-called “kernel and husk” paradigm, and therefore has greater resonance with *inculturation*.

Hiebert (1987:104ff) argues that the period from 1800 to 1950 should be known as “the era of noncontextualisation” as far as Protestant missions were concerned. Theology had been defined once and for all and now simply had to be “indigenised” into non-Western cultures without surrendering any of its essence. With its standardised and controlled product, there is a danger that the Alpha brand has similarities to this 1950s approach to mission. As Heard (2009:224) notes, while publishers and users of Alpha are allowed to translate the course into different contexts and languages, such things may only be done without surrendering the core essence. Of course, having being turned into a franchise, like McDonald’s Alpha had to standardise its product and control its brand integrity if a uniform course can be made available to the world. In relation to branding, this makes complete sense, and resonates with a consumerist culture that feels safer purchasing branded products – as Vicar 2 acknowledged. However, in doing so, Alpha incurs the problems associated with the translation model of contextualisation – absolutism. Bosch (2003:423) observes that in practice, what this contextualisation involves is universalising one’s own theological position, making it applicable to everybody and demanding others submit to it. With Meadows (2007), Heard (2009) argues that this is what Alpha does, taking a locally developed programme of catechesis and commodifying it into a globally marketed package for evangelism and discipleship making. There is undoubtedly truth in this critique, as we have seen, although it is also clear that HTB are aware of the tension and are both trying to maintain the clarity of the Alpha brand and encourage local adaptation at one and the same time.

The alternative to the translation model, posited by Heard (2009), is *inculturation*, the very thing which highly McDonaldised global brands work against in some respects, given their global, rather than local focus. Inculturation involves what Schreiter terms an “ethnographic approach”, with the emphasis on a holistic, community centred (local) approach, rather than offering a pre-packaged product – typified by the approach of Donovan, Roman Catholic missionary to the Masai tribe, who argues that “Evangelisation is a process of bringing the gospel to people where they are not where you would like them to be.” (1982, vi). In other words, conversion will involve not simply the transfer of individuals from their culture to the culture of the church, but

rather the transformation of their culture which, in a reciprocal dynamic, will also enrich and transform the culture of the Church (Cray, 2004:87; Hiebert, 2008).<sup>44</sup>

As Heard (2009) acknowledges, there are of course difficulties and dangers with inculturation – one being a very definite danger of relativism, or syncretism. Shorter (1994) argues syncretism is present in every form of Christianity from New Testament times; inculturation implies a continual struggle with syncretism, a struggle with those elements of culture which are incompatible with the gospel. These dangers are real, but should not be invoked as an excuse for postponing inculturation (Shorter, 1994:152). Whilst acknowledging the contextual nature of all theology, there is the creedal Trinitarian faith, what Bosch (2003:427) calls the “universal and context-transcending dimensions of all theology” that need to be respected and preserved to remain authentically Christian. As Shorter (1994) observes, this will sometimes be manifest in a tension between the local and the global – the necessary tension between continuity and discontinuity, between “*homeostasis* (the ability to maintain an equilibrium and to rearrange itself so as to keep things steady) with *morphogenesis* (the ability to grow, change shape, and adapt without breaking apart).” (Bretherton, 2007:51; Walls, 2002). For Shorter (1994), one critical weakness in Donovan’s approach is the over-emphasis on the local, where

...a missionary has only to present God and Jesus Christ and his [sic] work is finished. The rest he can safely leave to the people he has evangelised: the invention of its liturgy, the shape of the local church, the form of its ministry; because their insights and models, though different from Euro-American culture, have true and lasting validity. While it is true that local Churches throughout the world should not become carbon copies of Churches in Europe or America, it must be stressed that there is no culturally neutral Gospel, no culture-free knowledge of Jesus Christ. Moreover, if it is to survive, the Maasai Church cannot exist in a vacuum. (Shorter, 1994:84f).

In this respect it must be said that Donovan (1982:16) does appear a little naive in stating the relation between his methods and those of the apostle Paul, who as the New Testament reveals, was much more clearly a planter of connected churches. A key to finding a way forward in this respect might lie in Bretherton’s (2007)

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<sup>44</sup> In this respect, of course, we must acknowledge that this is not simply the case with respect to mission “in other countries”, but also relevant to the multiple cultures in the UK, not simply ethnic cultures but ones shaped by class and other considerations.

understanding of hospitality (as opposed to tolerance) which enables a balance between the poles of *homeostasis* and *morphogenesis*, locating its theological roots within the Great Banquet (Luke 14) and Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10), as well as Christian tradition. Hospitality offers a way of welcoming the stranger that is nevertheless transformative of relationships, creating space for conversation and taking proper account of difference – the church “neither separates itself from the world nor becomes assimilated to the world.” (Bretherton, 2007:51)

The gospel is not supracultural but transcultural. It cannot exist outside of all cultures but it can be faithfully expressed and incarnated in every culture. In this respect, we must acknowledge the danger named by Vicar 2, that branding a faith course, if it is presented as too much of a McDonaldised, pre-packaged “solution”, might well discourage reflective practice and the slow, patient, critical work that contextualisation and inculturating the Gospel needs. This might be an attraction for church leaders who are unconfident or unskilled at evangelism, but as Heard (2009) contends it could prove disastrous for the church in the long term as people become deskilled in their context. Heard also cites Booker and Ireland's (2003) research, which shows that locally written courses have a greater impact on participants than both Alpha and Emmaus, because they are better tailored to their local context. Against this, however, lies a crucial point – whilst tailored courses may be better for the participants who actually attend, the research of Einstein (2008) suggests that well branded courses might be better at attracting numbers of non-church goers to attend. Small churches simply cannot replicate the ubiquity of a brand like Alpha. It is tempting to suggest that the solution lie in a middle way, where local churches harness the strengths of marketing to attract non-church goers in tandem with a more contextualised approach once you are on the course. Alpha restricts the extent to which the course can be modified in order to protect the wider brand, but does not make customisation impossible.

One recent attempt to try to do this in the Church of England is a new course – “Pilgrim” which aims to take a longer, more steady view of Christian discipleship in terms of its ongoing materials, and draws from theologians from a broad range of traditions (Atwell, Cottrell, Croft and Gooder et al, 2013). Pilgrim claims to approach

the great issues of Christian faith not through persuasion, but participation in a pattern of contemplation and discussion with fellow travellers, with materials adapted to their parish context. Parish take up of Pilgrim is being encouraged by the hierarchy and leadership within the Church of England, but lacks the national and international, supra-church marketing of Alpha. It is too early to discern both what the take up, effectiveness and impact of Pilgrim will be, but it will be interesting to watch.

### ***5.5 – Concluding reflections on Alpha - the dangers of branding a “course to God”***

What then, are we to make of the dangers of branding faith, as typified by the Alpha course? A number of concerns about branding faith have been raised and explored, both in our focus groups and by theologians and researchers, whose reflections we have surveyed. Alpha is certainly a brand with some flaws – in addition to the kinds of theological reservations that have been raised, and the dangers of McDonaldisation poses, it faces a need to adapt in the future in case it becomes, as Vicar I puts it, a “tired brand”. Drane (2007) has posited that Alpha is still approaching evangelism from a modernist mindset, and Murray (2007) has questioned whether the assumptions Alpha makes about the faith knowledge of its participants will survive much longer in an increasingly post-Christendom context.

We have outlined a number of concerns about reductionism or criticisms about the theology of Alpha. Inevitably, with any short introduction to a subject as vast as Christian faith, people will disagree with the emphasis – Brookes (2007) notes that Alpha has been criticised by different groups both for being too conservative and too liberal. There have also been concerns that the aspects of McDonaldisation, whilst making Alpha relevant for a consumer society, could also render it, in the words of Percy (1997) a package not a pilgrimage, offering salvation by copyright and potentially harming the long term mission of the church too as practitioners use it as a short cut away from the hard yards of contextualising the Gospel where they are. On balance, whilst these dangers are real enough, the evidence of the data in our focus groups suggest that they are not reflective of the experience of the majority of our participants who have actually experience the brand; neither do they square with the highly reflexive awareness of both participants and the



practitioners, the vicars who actually use Alpha. Our sample from East Midlands Churches shows that Alpha as a brand clearly can have a beneficial impact on people's faith journeys in this context – but “much depends on who is leading it.” Sensitive local leadership must tailor the materials as well as they can, and Alpha should only be seen as one aspect of a much wider process rather than a silver bullet that will save the church in its own right. Both the brand and the church need to take some responsibility for this – we must acknowledge Vicar 2's aside about brands carrying a “warning label”; but at the same time we must challenge church leaders to take responsibility for being reflective and self-aware in their practice, and where structural issues (inadequate training in theological reflection, unrealistic time pressures for clergy or pressure for growth coming from more senior church leaders, whether explicit or implicit within church culture) play into this temptation to look for short cuts, we must challenge the church denominations themselves. Finally, on McDonaldisation, we must note in addition that the question marks raised here might well loom larger in other contexts – if using branding means placing a Western, capitalist cultural spin on Christian faith, then the issues of translation v inculturation will become even more significant in other parts of the world, as well as in different parts of our own country. A wider study would no doubt inform that further.

On the dangers of Alpha de-Christianising the UK - Brian's (2010) concern that Alpha might stifle people's faith exploration and actually harm the mission of the Church is difficult to justify given the data. If Alpha is presented as an end in itself or as a total package, people may feel having done Alpha but not made a faith commitment that they have tried Christianity and it hasn't worked for them; but again, local handling of their relationships ought to mitigate against that. In a sense, this misunderstands how people seem to come to faith or renew their faith through Alpha – as Booker & Ireland (2005) note, and as our research data backs up, it is the belonging that is the most important, as part of a wider process. With any faith initiative, there is a danger that a bad experience could put people off Christianity altogether; people will sometimes be mishandled by the church, and there will be more and less sensitive Alpha practitioners out there, as Ailsa's experience seemed to suggest. That said, if genuine enquirers come on the course, it is surely unrealistic to expect that all of them will wish to continue their journey of faith – even in the gospels,

people sometimes choose to walk away after their encounters with Jesus.<sup>45</sup> Alpha seems unable to win here in the eyes of critics – either criticised for primarily recycling existing believers, or where the drop-out rate (which indicates a higher number of non-church goers) criticised for the retention rate on the course (Brian, 2010; Booker & Ireland, 2005). One weakness of current research into Alpha is a lack of solid data about why people have left the course; our own research data does not help too much beyond Ailsa's negative experience, and in a sense, more rigorous one-to-one interviews would be needed. Richter and Francis (1998) have highlighted some of the challenges this kind of research can involve.

Branding faith courses such as the Alpha course does not mean entering into an irredeemable Faustian pact – far from it, on balance it appears to be a positive thing in terms of the successful spread of courses like Alpha and their spur to encourage other churches to reflect on their mission praxis. However, to return to the language of RCT for a moment, there are clearly costs, as well as benefits. Ward (1998) is right to warn us that Faith brands are a western capitalist contextual tool, and will carry with them the problems of a late capitalist society. Bosch (1998) would no doubt note this as a helpful reminder of the *missio dei*, the notion that God is at work in the world and is able to use imperfect means to achieve his ends. Such a notion must never be used to discourage reflection on what might constitute best practise, but does release us from unrealistic expectations within the life of the church and allow for the possibility of grace. As the Bishop interviewed pointed out:

*Bishop Thierry: Everything reduces God! When you preach on a Sunday morning, you reduce God, because what you're saying is not the whole counsel of God...there are always things we miss...*

*The accusation that brands are deficient is only to say that the whole church is deficient in some way.*

The nature of branding explains both the success of Alpha, its growth and ubiquity, as well the course's limitations and difficulties. Discipleship is a life journey, not a course; but well

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<sup>45</sup> cf., e.g., the rich young man - Mark 10:17-31; Matthew 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-30 – to say nothing about Jesus' direct clashes with other religious teachers

branded courses such as Alpha can play a valuable role in helping people on their journey, and as such, branding faith can be affirmed, albeit in a critically aware way. As Barrow (2007:420) observes:

Whatever problems some of us might have with its content (and I have a number), this is a venture which is seeking to create an opportunity for people who have lost touch with Christianity. It enables them to meet faith again (or for the first time) and to do so on good ground of food, friendship and welcome. Astonishingly, this is something which the majority of churches in Britain and Ireland have shown little interest in over the past forty years – even though sharing food and tables, and meeting Jesus there without regard to religious restrictions, is the very essence of what the Gospels depict.

In the next chapter, we will explore some of ecclesiological issues raised by faith brands, moving beyond faith branded courses to para-church movements and festivals such as Spring Harvest and New Wine. We will also begin to explore Fresh Expressions as a contextual alternative to McDonaldised courses such as Alpha, and think about the relationships between faith brands and more traditional expressions of church; and move from there to consider the dangers of homogenizing faith and some of the issues branding faith might pose to Christian discipleship.

## **6. Faith brands and their relationship to the local church – supporting, augmenting or undermining in mission?**

In our previous chapter we explored the notion that there was a danger that faith brands might present a reductionist account of God, or McDonaldisise the Christian faith. Whilst acknowledging the reality of these dangers, we concluded that branding faith courses such as Alpha nevertheless also offered positive potential as a way to enable people to grow in their faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – albeit in a globalised Western capitalist culture, rather than a more localised contextualised culture.

In this chapter, we will explore the ways in which faith brands support and augment the mission of the church and reflect on the ways in which participants suggested they had helped them grow in their faith. We will examine some of the concerns that participants had about the wider impact of branding faith, particularly in relation to issues around ecclesiology; and we will reflect on the use of branding within Fresh Expressions and consider the use of Fresh Expressions in mission as an alternative to more centrally packaged, branded courses such as Alpha.

### ***6.2 – Faith brands and their relationship to the church: augmenting the ministry – and continuing an older tradition?***

#### ***6.1.1 – Faith brands complement the local church***

The first thing to say as we reflect on faith branding in relation to the church is that our focus group participants were critically affirming of it. We have seen already how faith brands have helped them in their faith journeys, and looked more in depth at the challenges and opportunities that branded courses such as Alpha have brought the church in enabling people to explore the Gospel. I do not propose to look at faith courses any more in this chapter. Instead, we will focus on the ways in which group members talked about other faith brands – such as New Wine or Spring Harvest – have helped them in the faith journey, sometimes providing a kind of “third space” for exploration and encounter.

We saw in chapter 3 that this was particularly evident in the experiences of Bernadette, Brian and Camilla, as well as the members of Group E, who talked at length about the interplay between different faith brands and the fellowship of their local church, especially the relationships within their small group. Vicar 2 affirmed that for him, these kinds of faith brands had been significant – both in his own faith journey, and for his own congregation and the wider Church:

*Vicar 2: If I look at the milestones on my journey of faith I associate two years at Spring Harvest as a late teenage as a significant experience, umm...*

*CH: In what way?*

*Vicar 2: Particularly because, for me, being brought up in quite a narrow, insular Christian community, intense, loving, but a spirituality that is set apart from the world, Spring Harvest was an eye opener to – wow, I'm part of something bigger, and actually, I'm part of something, there was a window into a world of young Christians as well, it was okay to be a young Christian, and not an isolated minority. And I'd associate my first experience of, I suppose being filled with the Spirit with Spring Harvest, because I guess it happened there...so I kind of look back on that as quite a significant time. Um...and I guess my impression of Spring Harvest has changed over the years, but it still seems from where I'm coming, it still seems to me a servant of the church, trying to be a broad umbrella, um, a safe place to be exposed to the wider - the wider Christian community coming together and I think an attempt to engage with the issues that the contemporary church are facing - (CH, mmm) albeit possibly doing it in a fairly safe, middle class, slightly conservative kind of mode.*

For Vicar 2's own faith journey, Spring Harvest was a place where he could broaden his faith experiences beyond what was to his mind a fairly narrow local church fellowship and, as a young person, encounter other Christians his own age. This mirrors what Eric and Ed articulated – Spring Harvest was a safe space where they could meet others, further their exploration, and sometimes, a safe space where they could take an additional, but significant steps in their faith journey – in Ed's case, the gradual sense of what he terms “putting the light on”. For Vicar 2, his first experience of being “filled with the Spirit” – which also resonates with Bernadette and Brian's perceptions of their experiences of the Spirit being deepened through New Wine. In this respect, faith brands appear to be supporting the work and mission of the local church, providing something additional – possibly, as I argued

in Chapter 4, comparable to the role of orders in the medieval church, or aspects of pilgrimage (Mobsby, 2010). In this respect, it might well be argued that they are a continuation of a religious picture that would be familiar to inhabitants of Britain in the Middle Ages, which as Davison and Milbank (2010:147) rightly note included churches, chapels, monasteries and holy sites. A parishioner might be baptised in his parish church, attend mass in his guild chapel, have the opportunity to seek help in illness from the monks at a nearby religious house and go on a pilgrimage to a saints well, holy site or to his Cathedral – variety and networks are perhaps not so new after all, albeit that the pace and intensity of them has increased in a mobile, mass-communicating, internet-capable modern world. Cray (2010) has observed, within so-called “new monasticism” there is an appeal, particularly to younger adults, in locating one’s discipleship in a culture, but also through belonging to a community. Networks such as New Wine, or gatherings such as Spring Harvest offer a chance to have a more “intense” experience than is possible simply in the local context or to belong to a communal network that clearly references but also goes beyond the local. On the New Wine website, it is clear that they recognise that part of the value of their conferences is that they can provide “for church leaders and members alike, with facilities beyond the scope of individual churches” (<http://www.new-wine.org> [online]). The link and complementary relationship between the local church and the New Wine Gathering (conference) is made particularly explicit here.

Bishop Thierry agreed, stressing the partnership between the local church and parachurch faith brands:

*Bishop Thierry: I don't think we can do without them [faith brands] quite honestly – I think they're, they're ginger groups, they are ways that God begins to, er, make things happen in a particular way – er, usually in evangelism but in other, in discipleship as well, and that you need the interaction of the denominational and the para church, and, er, er, they need each other, even if they don't always recognise that...*

In this regard, an important insight that might help us understand the relationship between churches and faith brands can be found in the notion of *modality* and *sodality* identified by Winter (1973). Modality is understood as a structured fellowship in which there is no distinction of sex or age, while a sodality is a structured fellowship in which membership

involves an adult second decision beyond modality membership, and is limited either by age or marital status (Winter, 1973:224). In this use of terms, Winter sees both the denomination and the local congregation as modalities, and a mission agency or local men's club as examples of sodalities. His secular parallel to this is found in that of a town (modality) compared to a private business (sodality) – as such, sodalities are “regulated” by modalities but not “administered” by them (1973:224).

Winter argues that modality and sodality are both complementary structures of God's redemptive mission that need to work in co-operation, not competition, if the Church is to remain healthy and effective. In the Mediaeval (Roman) church he argues these two modes can be found in the contrast between the modality of the universal Catholic church) and the sodality of orders, monasteries etc. Winter (1973:225) acknowledges that at times there could be rivalry or tensions between the structures (bishop v abbot, diocese v monastery etc.) but argues that for the most part the synthesis between modality and sodality was one of the great achievements of the Mediaeval period. He also laments that the biggest mistake of the Reformation was that in seeking to curb excesses, the Protestant church is guilty of failing to exploit the power of sodality – a strategic error that was not corrected until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with advent of mission organisations such as the Baptist Missionary Society or the Church Mission Society (CMS). Winter (1973:227) argues that Carey's famous book *An Enquiry*, which proposed “the use of means for the conversion of the heathen” was referring, in the word “means” to the need for a sodality – the creation of the Baptist Missionary Society.

Winter's analysis is compelling, although there are some difficulties – whilst his analysis is clear in more recent church history, it is more problematic to delineate between Modality and Sodality in the forms and patterns of the New Testament Church. That said, Winter's argument highlights the interplay between the Modality of the embedded Christian church with the sodality of roving ministries such as that of the apostle Paul and his small bands of accompanying missionaries (1973:221); and whilst a neat division between these two structures is trickier to identify, there is nevertheless enough of a pattern evident to argue for what Kraft (1973) has argued as *dynamic equivalence*, if not formal replication, in the history of the church as its ministry grew and developed.

In that context, although faith brands vary in terms of the kinds of movements and parachurch organisations they represent – *Alpha* is an evangelistic course, in contrast with *New Wine* which sees itself a renewal movement within Anglicanism as well as a conference – it might well be argued that faith brands represent a new form of sodality. This being the case, there is a theological understanding within missiology to suggest that faith brands might be part of God’s redemptive activity. Not only that, but the evidence from this data – such as Bishop Thierry’s expressed conviction about the partnership between the local church and parachurch faith brands - appears to both to support the idea that faith brands could be regarded as sodalities, and also support Winter’s (1973) key argument that modality and sodality complement one another as structures of God’s redemptive mission. It is normal and normative that the modal church has a mission, and also that the sodal mission is ecclesial – as Newbigin (1953:201) memorably put it “an unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.”

### **6.1.2 – Differences between conferences and networks/movements.**

It is clear then, that faith brands can play a complementary role to the ministry of the local church. Bishop Thierry talked of his role in the management of Spring Harvest, and argued that one of the things that distinguishes Spring Harvest from New Wine or Alpha was that the leadership of Spring Harvest had made a deliberate decision to restrict their activities to their conferences and holiday park, seeing their roles as supporting and equipping existing churches rather than trying to become a movement:

*Bishop Thierry: We are distinct from some of the other people because they are networks – you buy into the New Wine brand, you buy into, er, the Alpha brand, er, we don’t do that, I mean, we may have to do more of that because actually in terms of marketing our event we will need to get more involved,*

*CH: Mmm.*

*Bishop Thierry: um, and ours I guess is an ageing population because ours reflects ordinary churches rather than newer growing churches.*

*CH: Mmm*



*Bishop Thierry: Er, and I think what happens...what's happening with branding? So you've got some brands which cross boundaries*

*CH: Mmm-hmm*

*Bishop Thierry: and you've got some brands which are denominationally, er, distinctive. So New Frontiers – people from New Frontier go to New Frontiers conferences, people from Pioneer go to Pioneer conferences,*

*CH: Yep*

*Bishop Thierry: people from Elim go to Elim conferences, er, and so they are denominationally specific, and it's qui, it's therefore quite difficult for the rest of the us to be able pull people from those denominations to our events, so we get very few p-although we've got a lot speakers that come from new churches at Spring Harvest-people are exposed*

*CH: Ness, Ness Wilson for example? She's come recently hasn't she?*

*Bishop Thierry: Yeah - a great spread of really good people, and we try to have that, and we try to expose our guests to stuff which is right across the church...we are mainly catering for people in traditional denominations.*

*CH: That's interesting, yeah*

*Bishop Thierry: and its a deliberate policy – I mean, because, we are, we are an event and a resource to ordinary churches, we don't see ourselves as a network or a movement.*

*CH: Okay.*

*Bishop Thierry: And that is quite an important branding distinction. And therefore we don't, for instance, try and raise money for Spring Harvest, we're not a ministry, whereas you will find [if] you go to a lot of other events they will take a collection in order to further the work of...we try and stay on our own two feet the money coming in pays for the event and that's it, sort of thing*

*CH: So why has Spring Harvest taken that decision to not be a network?*

*Bishop Thierry: I think because if you are trying to equip the whole church, you're saying to yourself, we don't want to be a niche –*

*CH: Mmm.*

*Bishop Thierry: er, we want to be something which is genuinely able to say to anybody from any church, you'd be very welcome to come, this is where we sit, we're charismatic and evangelical if you want to put labels on it, but if you come from a middle of the road church or a Catholic church, you're more than welcome to come along if you find it con, er, convivial. And some do, you know.*

*CH: Mmm.*

*Bishop Thierry: We may have to change that, cos' as a policy, we've been going for 35 years now, actually, we're finding people more and more buy in to the movement stuff, and we aren't a movement, and therefore we're a bit non-sexy, and er, and there's a sense in which we may, we may not be continue without reinventing ourselves, but it would, it would take a very conscious decision to try and do that. Whereas, you know, others, you join it because its, its on the way somewhere...*

Bishop Thierry's view that "movement" type faith brands/churches tended to attract a younger demographic supports the data from our focus groups and the feelings of Vicar I about faith brands being more significant to younger church members. Bishop Thierry also expressed a critically aware but undoubtedly positive view of the role of faith brands in helping people to progress in the journey of faith. It was clear from our interview that he saw faith brands and the local church playing different but complementary roles; in fact, he gave a concrete example from his own life as he talked about his view that sometimes, "non-church" Christian organisations were necessary and could enable engagement with faith that churches were not as well placed to do. In his case, Crusaders (now Urban Saints) played a pivotal role in his coming to faith that was possible precisely because it was a youth organisation separate from the Church.<sup>46</sup> This was because of his own particular family background, especially the perspective of his father, a lapsed Roman Catholic who was quite hostile towards the church:

*Bishop Thierry: Crusaders, which has now rebranded itself as Urban Saints, was, was very significant, because what it did for me was that it got me near church where I wouldn't otherwise have been, because it was a non-church organisation. It was a-an interdenominational youth organisation which had no denominational affiliation and deliberately didn't get kids into church itself and since I would never had gone to church because my family background was such that church odd and weird and anathema, my dad was a lapsed Catholic – I would never have gone near it - so I joined Crusaders it was a Sunday bible club and camping thing, um, and on the holidays and the camps that was the place where I became a Christian, so that was a very*

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<sup>46</sup> The shift in brand name from "Crusaders" to "Urban Saints" is an interesting development in a globalised, interfaith context. The Urban Saints website simply notes that "during the centenary year [2006] it was decided that a new century required a new name – a name that would better serve sharing the good news of Jesus with young people in the 21st century. To this end, Crusaders became 'Urban Saints' on 1st January 2007." However, one might speculate that this might be an example of a brand ("Crusaders") becoming "toxic" or acquiring unhelpful connotations. How would "Crusaders" be perceived if a church were working in, e.g., a predominantly Muslim context? Might "Crusaders" in the religious sense have become tarred by an association with perceptions about "Crusaders" in the historical sense? <http://www.urbansaints.org/> [online].

*significant, er, faith brand which I think a lot of people became Christians through in the 60s in particular, 50s and 60s, you will still find people in Christian ministry who found faith through that particular brand. I guess it was doing the same sort of job as Soul Survivor does these days but in a very different way, obviously...*

From the data in our interviews and focus groups, and from the documentary analysis of our faith brands themselves, it is clear that the faith brands Spring Harvest, Alpha and New Wine all see themselves as supporting the ministry of the local church in some way, and that this is how they have been experienced by our participants, many of whom have experienced significant growth as a result of their engagement with faith brands (particularly the younger, more evangelical group members).

### **6.1.3 – Faith brands and denominations – are denominations a brand?**

Of course, as we are reflecting on the relationships between faith brands and local churches or their denomination, we need to acknowledge that because branding is a woolly concept, denominations themselves can be labelled as “brands”. As we saw in Chapter 4, there were different perspectives on this question; Group D felt that one or two of the newer churches might be brands, and could acknowledge the use of branding methodology in their church, but did not indicate that they thought of the Church of England as a brand.

Vicar 2 wrestled with the question of whether denominations were brands and offered a qualified yes – he noted a distinction between denominations and commercial brands but recognised aspects of the family likeness.

*Vicar 2: Denominations probably are a form [of faith brand] because they are a label that – a label that ex- conveys some sense of descr- a label that carries a suggestion of – which is not a definition but begin, can begin to define in this case a worshipping community or a spiritual tradition. So it is a label that carries values and meanings and associations. The difference I suppose to a brand is that it's not – I'm sure it is deliberately– I could be wrong here – I'm not sure it is deliberately promoted in the same way as, say, Heinz promote their beans, I don't know.*

*I think there probably is a distinction but they're certainly in the same family. It conveys and it confers meaning as well.*

*CH: So there's similarity and difference?*

*Vicar 2: There is similarity and difference*

Vicar 2 went on to say that this sense of values was important to him having “grown out of” the Brethren tradition into Anglicanism – for him, there had been a movement from one stream within the Christian tradition to another, and the values expressed in the Anglican brand were significant. In years gone by this “switching” would still have occurred, but without the language of branding being applied – we acknowledge again the point made by Marketing Expert 1 in chapter 3, that the language of branding is a set of conceptual tools we now apply to describe a reality.<sup>47</sup>

Vicar 2 and the focus group participants were qualified or hesitant in describing the Church of England as a brand, but much clearer about the new churches. Why might this be? I would posit that older, more established denominations are not only less overtly branded than newer churches, they also differ in terms of breadth and focus. What it means to be “Anglican” is much less clear than what it means to be a member of the “the Vineyard”, “New Frontiers”, “Hillsongs London” or “Willow Creek” – just few of the newer churches who are much more self-consciously “branded” than the Church of England. As Voas (2014:xix) writes:

Consistency is generally seen as part of the brand promise: the consumer can be confident that a McDonald's hamburger will taste the same in Moscow and Atlanta. Such reliability is not found in Anglican churches, which offer worship styles ranging from hyper-ritualistic to guitars-and-video, combined with theologies from radical orthodoxy to religionless Christianity. Does this diversity undermine the brand, or has it cleverly been stretched to colonize all market niches?

The answer is probably, both. Furthermore, I would posit that our data suggests that faith brands like New Wine or Spring Harvest might well help fill a kind of need for Christians (such as Brian and Brenda, to offer one example) who are members of broader, more traditional denominations in providing an additional focus to their spiritual identity – in

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<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding the obvious ways in which, in late modernity, the medium and the message become related and can shape one another – particularly with respect to technological tools.

contrast to newer, narrower, more focussed and more obviously branded denominations (such as New Frontiers or the Pioneer Network) who as Bishop Thierry acknowledged, tended to stick to their own conferences and access Spring Harvest (and presumably New Wine and other para-church conferences) less.

In sum, faith brands augment and support the ministry of the local church. As Bishop Thierry adds,

*Bishop Thierry: I don't see why there should be [a tension between faith brands and their ways of engaging people as Christians and the role of the church] – everybody ne- its no different from the traditional stuff from saying we're going away on retreat as a parish. We're going to Walsingham; we're going on pilgrimage. You know, this is just another way of the church, er, finding ways, outside of the ev – you know, what's the normal every day is the week by week engagement through parish, teaching, preaching, eucharist*

*CH: Yep*

*Bishop Thierry – that's the Church of England pattern. And then what do you need? You need particular places and particular contexts where you are stimulated in faith – and that's, you know, there must be parallels if you look back to the 19th century to stuff like the temperance movement, all those other things that people got stuck into, there is a whole pile of Victorian examples of stuff where similar things happened; they were para-church, and they, er, reinvigorated people's faith...*

As people engage with faith brands they will, however, begin to ask questions of their local church or denomination's ways of doing things. We now examine some of the ecclesiological issues faith brands raise as we continue exploring their impact on people's faith development.

## **6.2 – Faith brands and their relationship to the church – some ecclesiological issues considered**

We have seen that faith brands certainly play a complementary role to the local church in helping people explore their faith. However, alongside that, branding faith might also pose some difficulties to traditional modes of Church and structures of Church authority and accountability. What does participation in particular faith brands do to one's ecclesiology?

### **6.2.1 – Faith brands both challenge and support the Church**

Vicar 2, whilst being positive about the role New Wine plays in helping encourage Christians, certainly had some concerns about how New Wine might also undermine the very church they claimed to be supporting by seeking to shape and influence it in particular ways – or in some sense, by seeking to gain primary allegiance of its participants over and above their allegiance to their “parent” denomination:

*Vicar 2: ...naturally I have sympathy with – with much of the brand, with much of the underlying values of New Wine,*

*CH: Mmm-hmm*

*Vicar 2: but there's something about the champions of the brand and the style associated with the brand, particularly in the leaders, um – and again, this is, you know, in many ways this is not quite rational, its more of an instinctive response to the brand leaders has been negative, in the sense of slight concern about personality cult which has become associated with - with that, with New Wine, and also a little bit of the, a little bit of the brand almost becoming a – in this case, rather than serving the wider church, b-perhaps - maybe usurping and becoming...*

*CH: Mmmm.*

*Vicar 2: (sniffs)...somehow – here's a – not serving the church but becoming the church somehow and just a little a bit of dis-ease about that. So that's been a mixed response enjoying lots of teaching, lots of things associated, on the whole encouraging the hope, confidence in the gospel, attempt to relate to contemporary culture...*

*CH: But an unease about what, particular personalities, character, ways they've tried to influence the church? What's...?*

Vicar 2: *Unease, um...I'm not entirely comfortable – it sounds like I'm nitpicking here – (laughter) – I'm not entirely comfortable with a slightly young brash, confident male, at times danger of disrespect, umm...*

CH: *For other traditions?*

Vicar 2: *For other traditions, which at its best is bold of conviction, at its best is borne of conviction, umm...At its worst is frustration and um, impatience, and I think arrogance, and is that particularly, because I suppose it's both, a number of personal responses to some of the leaders, not all of them I have to say, but some key figures, and - but also something of the – some of its the promotion maybe, and what can appear to me as self-promotion.*

CH: *Mmm.*

Vicar 2: *Has New Wine become bigger than the church that the brand originally sought to serve and build up? That's my concern.*

CH: *In the eyes of New Wine or in the eyes of the church?*

Vicar 2: *I think, I think I mean in the eyes of New Wine – because I think at the church its a bit more, 'cause it's either dismissed...I wonder whether New Wine has managed to create an insider/outside response to it, such that its either embraced or dismissed, which may be a pity um, that its managed to be distinctive enough that its created a strong, a strong response of adherence or dismissal –*

CH: *Mmm*

Vicar 2: *So when a church says, "we are a New Wine church",*

CH: *Mmm*

Vicar 2: *That's an interesting – so there's a d- there is a situation when it feels like a step towards a denomination if I'm honest...*

The language is fascinating – “usurping” the church and “becoming the church”; “taking a step towards a denomination”. The Vicar’s gut feeling is clearly uneasy with the approach and style of particular leaders within New Wine, but also with the notion that New Wine might well be moving beyond its remit of “supporting” the Church to “becoming” the Church. His observation that he is concerned that New Wine might become, in its own eyes, “bigger than the church that the brand originally sought to serve and build up” and that “when a church says, ‘we are a New Wine church’...there is a situation when it feels like a step towards a denomination” opens up a question about where people’s primary identity lies with respect to their church and theological tradition. This was hinted at earlier

in our discussion of evangelicalism's tendency to function as a transdenominational movement (McGrath, 1997). It also raises the question of what New Wine's ambitions might be within the Church they are purporting to serve. Documentary analysis of their website (<http://www.new-wine.org/> [online]) certainly makes it clear that New Wine are unashamed about their desire to disseminate a charismatic evangelical theology within the Church of England. Whilst Brian (2010) might raise similar concerns about the dissemination of charismatic evangelicalism through New Wine as he has with Alpha, there is nothing inherently wrong with that as long as respect is shown to others. Documentary analysis suggest a desire both to be clear about their convictions and show respect to those that disagree – as per their values:

***Gracious & Truthful*** – we want to be kind and generous in the way we think and speak about others whether they agree or disagree with us, while also clearly communicating what we believe and why we believe it. (<http://www.new-wine.org/> [online])<sup>48</sup>

Vicar 2's impression was that this aspiration was not always expressed through some of the leaders at New Wine – whilst his view of New Wine was positive in many respects, he was concerned by a kind of “arrogance” or disrespect he felt he has sometimes seen in some of the leaders, although he was quick to acknowledge that was not all of them by any means. A defender of New Wine might counter that this is a subjective impression – Vicar 2 himself was reticent and measured about it and confessed with laughter he might be in danger of nitpicking – and of course, as with any brand encounter (such as Ailsa's negative interactions with a participant on Alpha) sometimes individuals will, by their conduct, behave in ways that the brand itself might disagree with. Nevertheless, it serves as a reminder that faith brands might sometimes run the danger of reducing Christian faith in such a way that their

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<sup>48</sup> It might also be helpful here to also note, given the (already disputed) allegation Percy (1997; 2001) has made that charismatic evangelicalism as expressed through brands such as Alpha neglects social justice, that the New Wine vision makes specific aspirations to serving the poor and vulnerable, and that they make a pledge to include teaching about practical ministry to the poor within their conference gatherings – “Our Vision - To see the nation changed through Christians experiencing the joy of worshipping God, the freedom of following Jesus, and the power of being filled with the Spirit. To see churches renewed, strengthened and planted, living out the word of God in every aspect of life, serving God by reaching the lost, broken and poor, and demonstrating the good news of the Kingdom of God to all.” “Our Gatherings... providing seminars on a wide range of issues including ministry among the poor, social justice, ethics and the environment, as well as familiar themes of personal discipleship, family and church life.” (<http://www.new-wine.org/> [online])



adherants feel they are sole possessors of “the” truth, rather than being fellow pilgrims on a wider journey.

### **6.2.2 – Networks, lobbying and accountability – the negotiation of power relations.**

As far as seeking to influence the wider Church is concerned, many of the tools on the New Wine website and services on offer through the New Wine network certainly could be subtly used to gain influence within the Church. There is a leaders network where like-minded church leaders can support one another and share ideas. Within the Church of England these often find expression in local cell groups of clergy and church workers who meet together regularly to eat together and talk and pray about different issues facing them in ministry. There are numerous personal and church-related teaching resources, and job pages to facilitate those looking to serve in different kinds of ministries moving from one New Wine context to another. On the site there is also a facility to help people “Find a church” affiliated with New Wine in their locality - “a directory of all churches that have had some association with New Wine over the years”. A quick websearch of my own locality showed that this was the case - of the churches in the town, only those with a New Wine affiliation showed on the map. This will help anyone looking to move into an area to begin their search for a church to join find a congregation sympathetic to the values of “New Wine”, but equally, might reduce the chances of them trying another church round the corner “on the off chance” that they might join it – even if the tradition of that church might be different or broader than their own. It is an example of the shift to a network society (Castells, 1996 (2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn).)<sup>49</sup>

New Wine is clearly a significant network within the Church of England, and Vicar 2 has raised the concern that this could bring with it the danger that the brand begins to see itself as more significant than the Church. In terms of its influence as a network, there is nothing wrong with trying to influence an organisation, or with lobbying, in and of itself, as long as it is fair and open. At a basic level, most lobbyists or advocates carry out an important task -

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<sup>49</sup> Castells (1996; 2000) defines a network society as being a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks – although he is clear that cultural, economic and political factors, and not simply technology, are also significant in the make-up of the network society. Networking is an important cultural feature to note with respect to the notion of “belonging” in traditional membership of a church, and will have important implications for ecclesiology and (potentially) the balance between modality and sodality discussed earlier.

trying to influence decision-making on behalf of all sorts of groups e.g. the elderly, farmers, religions, sporting bodies, unions and charities. People have always sought to influence decisions; and in any system of governance, personal relationships and a quiet word in the “lobby”, or king’s ante-chamber or at the bar at party conference have always been ways to make views known. Scripturally, one might argue that Moses lobbied Pharaoh to let his people go, that Esther advocated for her people to her king, and that in the New Testament church, Peter lobbied church leaders in Jerusalem to accept Gentile believers.<sup>50</sup> Throughout history, lobbying has been used in political campaigns, often for justice, such as the abolitionists vigorously lobbying MPs to vote for an end to the slave trade. The problem with this, theologically, is connected to power and opportunity, and how that is used. Over the last century, “professional lobbying” has moved to a whole new level that often favours those with wealth – as commentators such as Zeiter (2008) and Cave and Rowell (2014) have shown, with reference to the so-called “cash-for-questions” scandals as well as the increasing power of corporations and the persistence of “old boy” networks (although Zeiter (2008) also highlights how complex lobbying has become in an internet savvy age, with charities and pressures groups often able to use different means in order to subvert traditional structures of power).

There is not space to give a substantial theological analysis of the ethics and morality of lobbying, save to note that they are dual-edged; within the Church of England, lobbying and debate between different strands of the church is hardly something new, but as ever, key questions remain regarding the use of power and ecclesiology. In this respect, one key question is to whom do New Wine’s leaders see themselves as being accountable? From the website, the Anglican denominational identity is visible but only very subtly. The biggest clue to answer the question of accountability is found both in the identities of the leadership team (especially the Regional Directors, all of whom are also church leaders in Anglican contexts, and therefore accountable to their denominational structures).<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, the existence of a New Wine leaders network within the Church of England clearly does cause some tensions at times. Bishop Thierry spoke about this, and was keen to stress that there was no significant ecclesiological issue, and that on balance faith brands

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<sup>50</sup> Exod 3-13; Esther 2-9; Acts 10,11 & 15.

<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note alongside this “played down” Anglican identity the journey of Mike Pilavachi, who leads the ministry of Soul Survivor, and was ordained deacon in the Church of England at Saint Albans Abbey on 1 July 2012. In Soul Survivor’s case, this appears to strengthen the sense of accountability and continuity with the Church of England, perhaps in contrast to New Wine’s circumspection about it.

like New Wine play a complementary and largely very positive role in helping people grow in their faith and supporting the ministry of churches and church leaders. Nevertheless, his comments do also reveal that there are also tensions in reality, and back up the view of Vicar 2 about the potential for divided loyalties between New Wine and Anglicanism. Asked if there was a tension between the role of faith brands in encouraging the faith development of individuals and supporting and resourcing local churches and their role as movements, lobbying groups, power groups within the national church, he responded:

*Bishop Thierry: Only if you see them as a threat. You know, we, we've got a very strong New Wine network in this part of [names place] because we've got [names some churches and individuals known as leaders within New Wine], I would guess about, I'm counting, 20-25% of my churches might be New Wine linked, or go to New Wine, it's very good in the summer I can go and walk round the field and they are all there you know, you can go and do a parish visitation all in one field in Shepton Mallet, and actually, I just think there is a both/and there – what you say to clergy is “please make sure you come to our clergy INSET days, please make sure you're involved in POT, but I know perfectly well that you get a lot of resourcing from the New Wine network meetings, please make sure you make time for them as well, they are going to support you in your ministry and you know, we're not in competition with each other”. Um, loads of our clergy went to the Alpha Leaders Conf- or was the it the Alpha's Leaders Conference, what do they call themselves now, they keep rebranding themselves, HTB Leaders Conference or Alpha I forget, [CH – some yeahs, agreements] they've changed it over, was the HTB Leaders Conference, it may still be actually, you know, and of course in [city name] you can access these things fairly easily. Um, there's no threat in that – unless, I mean, occasionally you get people slagging off the Church of England. I got, I had a very interesting row on Twitter a couple of summers ago when, er, one of the leaders in New Wine who ought to have known better slagged off the Church of England from a public stage, and, er, a lot of us were saying, you know, “you don't need to do that, and actually, you are biting the hand that feeds you cause you've paid by the Church of England, what do you think you're doing?” Um, he was just, it's the tendency to go hyperbolic when you don't need to and when you go hyperbolic you tend to say lots of things that you shouldn't do.*

*CH: Yes, and there is a difference between legitimate critique, and, you know-*

*Bishop Thierry: But I don't think any of these movements are a threat, I think all you have got to do is to make you sure you work with them, keep contact with them, network with them, and that's what I do. (coughs) I try to go to NW events when I can and I usually spend a couple of days each*

summer going down and visiting the conference. (coughs) Sorry, that's the paint getting to me. And I think what they provide is a sense of belonging, er, they provide, er, a particular identity for churches, you know, so often they will advertise themselves as, "we are a new wine network church" er, they provide, er, a real sense that er, there's a support from other like-minded people about the place, um, and they provide quite a lot of equipping. What's the downside? Um, they sometimes, if it's New Wine, they buy into Vineyard too much, and they get some slightly odd and ropey characters speaking there,

CH: Yep

Bishop Thierry: um, and you think, well why have you asked him, he's barmy? But that's because their origins are quite a lot in Vineyard, and when you scratch New Wine you get "Vineyard-shaped Anglicanism" quite often, and sometimes that's not helpful, and similarly with HTB/Alpha, because they are the huge movement they are with a huge budget bigger than lots of Dioceses, they do tend to see things as any good focussed movement does through their own lens all the time, and they are not particularly good at co-operation, you know, and it is like, er, negotiation with people who have got tanks on your, your lawn because if they decide to hold an event er, alongside yours as New Wine found out, you know, they clobber you in terms of attendance. But they're not, you know, neither of those are pathological events, similarly Soul Survivor, you know, although I keep asking the question, what's the future for Soul Survivor when Pilav decides to give up, which he isn't, you know, they haven't got a succession strategy, but again, if you want to get your young people converted and disciplined there's no better place to take them...

This lengthy reflection is fascinating in revealing in a number of ways. Firstly, it highlights the reality of the way in which relationships are between Bishops and church leaders with links into significant faith brand networks are actively negotiated and managed – in this case, by the Bishop himself, who realises the need to maintain positive relationships with a network which he estimates is now significant for around 1/4 of the churches in his Diocese. Of course, in practice in the Church of England, both Reformed and Catholic, the Bishop-Priest relationship has never been quite as straightforward in terms of power and authority as Canonical Oaths of Obedience might have us believe. But there is no doubt in this context that a being part of a significant faith brand network within the Diocese must significantly strengthen the hand of the Priest concerned – as Bishop Thierry's keenness to maintain the network from his side confirms.

Secondly, the mention of the Church of England/New Wine church leader who was, in Bishop Thierry's terms "slagging off" the Church of England from the public stage adds weight to the feeling of Vicar 2 that some proponents of New Wine might sometimes act as if the movement is in fact "bigger than the church".

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, the statement that dealing with HTB/Alpha can feel a bit like "negotiation with people who have got tanks on your lawn" confirms beyond doubt that faith brands do wield influence and power within the Church of England – even over the Bishops, albeit in a negotiated way where they acknowledge one another as colleagues rather than a threat. One can see in this exchange too the distinction Bishop Thierry made between New Wine and Alpha with the approach of Spring Harvest, who have purposefully eschewed "becoming a movement" and becoming more embroiled in the ongoing politics of the church up to this point – potentially, as he outlined earlier, to their cost.

### **6.2.3 – *Nothing new under the sun? Analogies in Church history.***

If by analogy faith brands are providing opportunities similar to those of medieval Orders – as our modality/sodality discussion earlier argued - we must acknowledge at this point that in that context too, the relationship between the central church and religious orders or mystics has never been smooth. It is clear from the writings of a mystic such as Margery Kempe that her relationship with the Church could be strained at times to say the least (Kempe and Windeatt, 1984). Kempe was not a member of a formal religious Order, but was recognised as a mystic by Julian of Norwich (Hirsch, 1989). Moreover, there plenty of members of Orders who are have challenged the Church at times. Rapley (2005) has pointed out, in a Roman Catholic context, both in the medieval period, as in the present day, Orders have been involved in not just implementing, but also shaping Church policy, and have sometimes challenged the traditional structures of the Church – often for good. Winter (1973) acknowledged that Abbots and Bishops did clash from time to time, but that in the main, the relationship of modality and sodality was for the most part complimentary in the mediaeval church. By way of a more recent example, one need only note the role of religious Orders in bearing the responsibility for evangelising and caring for the native people in Latin America, or the way in which religious Orders have sometimes found

themselves caught within Church/state battles in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Religious Orders have often found themselves challenging both the state and their own Church in relation to justice issues – as Liberation Theology testifies (Gutierrez, 1974).

It may seem odd to equate a movement such as liberation theology with the existence of faith brands, and some within the movement associated with liberation theology might be horrified at the suggestion – not least because of the relationship between expressing faith and late-capitalist culture found in the utilisation of branding methodology. But making an analogy between the role of faith brands and other para-church organisations in terms of how they offer opportunities for networking and engagement with faith in addition to the local church, as well as the subtle (and not so subtle) ways in which they have been able to cluster resistance to central church authority appears sound.

In a number of respects, what our data suggests about the role and influence of networks such as New Wine and Alpha, and their impact on ecclesiology, ties in with Ward's (2002) notion of Liquid Church. Whilst older members of our focus groups were more suspicious about the influence of faith brands, the younger members from groups D and E were much more relaxed about exploring and expressing their faith in a range of contexts. The local church – especially their small group – was not unimportant, peer relationships were crucial, as well as engagement with particular brands that they felt were relevant and helpful to their journey. This fits with Ward's argument that Church is becoming a network of different relationships and communications that address the needs of the isolated consumer-Christian by providing connection and community, located in common cause and similar desire for God. In this context, Christians will increasingly see leadership, authority and influence less formally and less connected to particular institutional roles (such as ordination or consecration) and more connected to their perceptions of whether a person or movement is inspired or full of the Spirit of God. For Ward (2008), this also links into the way in which encounter with God is mediated through cultural expression – church is both a “lived in culture” and also “indwelt” by the Trinitarian God. Notions of participation and mediation also help to explain the rise of Christian culture industries, especially the contemporary worship music scene – a music scene particularly relevant to the participants

of Group E, who were immersed in the contemporary worship scene and well aware of the different worship leaders who make it up.<sup>52</sup>

Bishop Thierry did not talk about ecclesiology in these terms, but is clearly aware of the kind of shift Ward argues is occurring, and takes care to manage his relationships with the relevant networks. For some, this might smack of compromise, potentially degrading the office of the bishop. I would argue that is a rather nostalgic view of history, and suggest rather that such flexibility shows wisdom and humility – albeit that Bishops still retain an edge and some authority to act, as his disagreement on Twitter with a New Wine leader he felt had stepped over the line demonstrates. If the data does indeed correlate with what Ward (2002) argues in relation to ecclesiology, the dangers of a somewhat disembodied notion of church will need to be mediated through church leaders who are able to engage Christians in relational connections whose quality is rooted in participation in Christ. It cannot be denied, however, that this presents major challenges for the shape of the soteriology as well as the ecclesiology of the Church of England, as Davison and Milbank (2010) observe – potentially pushing one's doctrine of church in the direction of Free Church Protestantism.<sup>53</sup> These are objections that they posit in relation to the Mission-shaped Church report and Fresh Expressions literature. Fresh Expressions offer an interesting counter point to “McDonaldised” faith brands such as Alpha – so we will consider their arguments in turn, as part of this discussion.

#### ***6.4 – Fresh Expressions and branding faith – Niche beers to Alpha's McDonald's and Coca-cola?***

Parachurch faith brands and brand networks are part of a shift in the culture of church that nevertheless have some echoes to orders and similar movements in church history. They play a complementary role to the local church in helping people explore their faith, but alongside that raise issues of power and influence, and pose some challenges to traditional ecclesiology. Many of these tensions are also evident in literature critiquing Fresh

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<sup>52</sup> Ward (2005), traces the development of the contemporary worship “industry” and how what is sung has changed the church, arguing that sung worship has become a means of communication and exchange between contemporary culture and the church – in effect, the songs (or the practise of singing or listening to them) carries the culture and practise of the church.

<sup>53</sup> Although it should of course be acknowledged that the development of networks is not unproblematic to more “membership” focussed ecclesial communities.

Expressions of church, and so whilst they relate to a wider shift in culture, they will be considered in relation to those debates as we examine the theology and methodology of Fresh Expressions Movement here. Although Fresh Expressions did not feature prominently in the field data emerging from our focus groups, often featuring only obliquely in moments such as the humorous quip when Vicar 2 was talking about some of the dangers of adopting branding too uncritically - “we’ll try a little bit of fresh expression on the side, and er, and we’ll do it all in a café” – they are significant to any debate about faith branding because they offer a contrasting approach to faith courses such as Alpha, a contrast mirrored in wider culture.

### **6.3.1 – Fresh Expressions – an introduction**

Fresh Expressions take their cue from the report *Mission-Shaped Church (MSC)* (Cray et al, ed., 1994), which officially advocated a “mixed economy of church”, that would see the flourishing of “Fresh Expressions” of church alongside traditional Anglican parish ministry.

If “church” is what happens when people encounter the risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter with each other, there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style, so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common. (Rowan Williams, in *Mission-Shaped Church*, Cray ed., 1994).

Endorsement by the Archbishop gave impetus to the movement, and Fresh Expressions and pioneer ministries have carried on developing. Alongside practical developments, theological and ecclesiological reflection is gradually emerging. The principles of *Mission-Shaped Church* have been refined and expanded, and a rationale for Fresh Expressions can now be found on the Church of England’s official websites for Fresh Expressions ([www.freshexpressions.org.uk/](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/) with further theological reflection included on [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide), which sees itself as “the shared wisdom of the pioneer community as a whole”).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Accessed 5/3/14. Central to this is the notion that this shared wisdom consists of dialogue between practitioners and theologians/researchers: “Content isn't top down ('We're telling you how to do it'), nor is it bottom up ('Let's create knowledge Wikipedia style'). Content is created side to side. From one side there is an offering of what we think works best. From the other side is the experience of practitioners and research.”



In terms of the methodological rationale for Fresh Expressions, the website clearly endorses a principle used embryonically in MSC – the homogeneous unit principle (HUP). This draws inspiration from the work of McGavran, who argued that people “like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” (1955:198). Consequently, it follows that mission should be focussed upon particular “homogeneous units”, what he called “people groups”, and that church planters should not aim to integrate different people groups into one church, at least initially. As we will see, the principle has been the subject of much debate, although the Fresh Expressions website wholeheartedly endorses it, and derives from it a rationale for planting highly culturally-specific expressions of church in the various subcultures of Britain today, each of which should be recognised as being “church” from the start – not evangelism, and not seen as a bridge into a wider church community (<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide>; see also Croft, 2008b:8).

How do Fresh Expressions relate to faith branding? As I have said earlier, in many respects it offers a contrasting approach to faith courses such as Alpha, a contrast mirrored in wider culture. Harkin (2011) argues, using examples such as Gap and Woolworths, that in a brand saturated world, one-size no longer fits all, and that brands need to specialise and tailor what they offer; the days of the stoic consumer accepting his Model T-Ford in any colour as long as it is black have gone.

There is broad consensus about this within both the academic marketing and business world – as Jones, (2001), Keller (2003), Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman and Hansen, (2009), Soloman, Bamossy, Askgaard and Hogg, (2013) demonstrate. In a globalised consumer market, consumers are drawn to brands that tell a unique story or appear tailored to niche needs – often expressing their authenticity through a connection to the local. So-called “craft beers” are an expression of this – with Heineken’s CEO recently admitting in an industry journal that a globally branded beer such as Heineken cannot compete against the “craft beer phenomenon”.<sup>55</sup> They appeal to different types of consumer. By analogy, if Alpha represents a globalised, McDonaldised approach, Fresh Expressions often utilise branding in a much more localised way – a niche craft beer to Alpha’s “Coca-cola”. A caveat is necessary here, because in making this link, I must confess that there is a variety of

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.beveragedaily.com/Manufacturers/Heineken-cannot-compete-with-US-craft-beer-phenomenon-CEO>, accessed 4/3/14.

Fresh Expressions, and they do not all utilise branding in the same way. However, even a quick glance at the opening page of the Fresh Expressions website reveals that many of them do make extensive use of local branding, with clear, focussed identities expressed in catchy brand names that build on local meanings and narratives – the first three used as examples in the introduction were called The Dock, Streetlight and Cook@Chapel respectively, with clear efforts at creating a good, strong local brand for the expression of church involved.<sup>56</sup>

### ***6.3.2 – Contextualising faith: some dangers to discipleship and evangelism posed by homogenisation***

As we saw earlier in our critique of the Alpha course, there are significant strengths to contextualising faith; as we have seen, it offers a way of avoiding some of the problems that critics such as Percy (1997) and Heard (2009) level at McDonaldised faith courses like Alpha. However, with it come other, different issues particularly those of relativism, or syncretism. Whilst noting that Fresh Expressions are in their infancy and must be given time to grow rather than simply judged on their beginnings, Hamley (2011) observes a number of theological and ecclesiological issues that are caused, in part, by the reliance of Fresh Expressions on McGavran's notion of the Homogenous Unit Principle and a less than rigorous use of "Biblical paradigms" in their approach to contextualisation; and the subsequent problems this raises for their ecclesiology.<sup>57</sup>

For Padilla (1982) it is clear both that the quantitative growth of the church is a legitimate concern in Christian mission, and also that the growth of the church takes place in specific social contexts with people generally preferring to become Christians without having to cross the barriers from one context to another. The real question lies with whether or not enabling people to become Christians without crossing barriers is "essential for the spread of the gospel" (McGavran, 1955:198) and whether it is biblically and theologically defensible.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/> accessed 4/3/14.

<sup>57</sup> In exploring the use of the Homogenous Unit Principle and the issues it raises for the church, I am hugely indebted to the insights of Hamley, a fellow doctoral researcher who studied Fresh Expressions prior to her current doctoral thesis in Old Testament Studies.

There is no doubt that McGavran's (1955) insights had some positive aspects; as well as the pragmatic recognition that reducing cultural barriers aids people in their engagement with church, the communal nature of human beings is acknowledged, in contrast with Western conceptualisations of the individual. McGavran (1970) also places a helpful emphasis on the importance of understanding group processes within the missionary task. If people are Christianised as groups their social life is preserved rather than destroyed.

Importantly, and as Hamley (2011) notes, McGavran's definition of people groups (and therefore, his use of the Homogenous Unit Principle) differs somewhat from the way in which the principle is used by Fresh Expressions pioneers. McGavran (1970:296) defines a people group as "a tribe, a caste or any homogeneous unit where marriage and intimate life takes place only within the society". Theologically, he draws on two main sources. The Great Commission, which he interestingly modifies from "to all nations" to "all people groups" to "homogeneous units" (1970:185), and the accounts of diversity within the church in the New Testament, which he interprets as a planting of different forms of church into different homogeneous cultural contexts, with a high emphasis on the freedom of Gentiles not to become Jews (1970:202ff). Both interpretations figure prominently in Biblical rationales given for Fresh Expressions (Ward, 2002; Frost & Hirsh, 2003; Cray (ed.) 2004; Long, 2004; Dunn, 2008; Morgan, 2008).

The difference between the definition of McGavran and those of Fresh Expressions pioneers is clear – for McGavran "people groups", and by extension, "homogeneous units" are groups where "marriage and intimate life" taking place within this particular group exclusively. This seems fundamentally different to the idea of planting churches in a network society where individuals belong, often by choice, to a multiplicity of networks (Hull, 2006:15). In McGavran's model, the "unit" shapes the entire life, systems of meaning and social interactions of a people. Hamley (2011) rightly asserts, citing the insights of Lutzbek (1996) and Hiebert (1994), that the givens of language, national identity and culture may (I would argue do) shape individuals to a much greater degree than the occupation, leisure activities or chosen networks of groups being targeted by Fresh Expressions pioneers. There is an important qualitative difference in faith conflicting with the "givens" of social identity (however welcome or problematic those challenges may be with regard, for example, to issues such as gender) as opposed to the 'chosen' components of identity that

postmodern generations are often described as combining in a search for self-actualisation (Ward, 2002; Hirsh, 2006), and to which brands are so often targeted.

In fact, McGavran's methodology can be questioned at an exegetical level at this point, moving as he (and Fresh Expressions practitioners) do from a Great Commission which is to "all nations" to one for "people groups" and then "homogenous units" (or postmodern tribes – Hirsch, 2006:144). It ignores the theological use of the words "nations" (Gk: *ethne*, Heb: *goyim*) and "people" (Gk: *laos*, Heb: *am*). Luz (2005:23) argues that the word translated "nation" in Hebrew and Greek is used intentionally to signify both "nation" and "Gentiles" to stress a universal and specific call in the Great Commission to include those previously excluded into the people of God (*laos theou*). The opposition between 'people' and 'nation' is crucial, in that the people of God are a people primarily constituted by God and organised around God's rule. In the Old Testament, the covenant with God's people (*am*) is consistently linked to its benefits for the nations (*goyim*) with a vision of final inclusion – as in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 (Preuss, 1992:285ff; Anderson, 1999). In the New Testament, there is a dynamic ambivalence about who can claim to be the 'people of God', played out strongly in John's Gospel, but also in Paul's careful dialectic in Romans and other writings, when being the people of God becomes defined by being 'in Christ', regardless of ethnic identity (Padilla, 1982). The loose usage of "people" in some Fresh Expressions literature could mask an essential New Testament dynamic that challenges concepts of identity and belonging. The shift is also illegitimate in that belonging to a "nation" is a result of birth, and non-negotiable, and homogeneity is often a result of non-access to diversity – through geographical limitation for instance. It is a significant shift to use "nation" to justify homogeneity according to the preferences and tastes of chosen sub-cultures. In addition, the homogeneity of a "nation" masks other diversities within that people group. Davison and Milbank (2010:79) pick this up cogently when they ask how far can we legitimately fragment "nations" into ever-narrowing, specific sub-cultures, before the Church becomes over-fragmented and unhelpfully segregated?

Having said that, as our data suggests, the reality is that younger Christians – particularly those in Group E – are already beginning to become more selective in choosing a church whose "style" suits them, as Edwina's comment about having made "a very distinctive choice about what kind of church to go to" reveals. Society has already fragmented itself into

subcultures, and this separation exists before the church engages with it. To offer one example from the East Midlands, the rationale behind the creation of Sanctum and the Order of the Black Sheep on the Fresh Expressions website targeting the alternative community suggests that coping with that fragmentation is behind the creation of the brand/fresh expression. The Pioneer minister who leads the project is nevertheless at pains to emphasise that the aim is not to set up a form of church that is exclusive – people are welcome however they dress and whatever music they are into – and also that the sense of connection, accountability and continuity with the wider church is extremely important to them.<sup>58</sup>

Returning to closer examination of McGavran's use of scripture, there are further problems – his assertion (1970:201) that nothing in the Bible required a believer to cross racial, linguistic or class barriers is simplistic and potentially misleading. Hiebert (1994) and Bosch (1991) have shown that whilst the relationships between religion, culture, race and class are complex, conversion to Christ is unlikely to leave them unaffected. McGavran understands Paul's assertion in Gal 3:28 that "There is Jew or Greek" as meaning that diversity is acceptable, but in context it seems more likely to understand it as signifying a re-framing of old categories when "in Christ" (Longenecker, 1990; Matera, 1992; Dunn, 1993:205ff; 1998). Appealing to Paul's "incarnational method" in contextualising the gospel must be balanced by a recognition also of the separation and holiness of the Christian community – seen, as Hagner (2008) argues, in scriptural traditions such as the Johannine tradition, but also in the life and ministry of Christ and his often challenging or subversive relationship to the powers of his day.

Secondly, as Padilla (1982) notes, the assumption – subsequently taken up in Fresh Expressions and Church Growth Movement literature (Ward, 2002; Dunn, 2008) – that churches in the New testament were homogenous and only loosely connected is questionable to say the least. Padilla offers compelling evidence that the church in the New Testament wrestled with diversity – disunity in Corinth, disputes in Acts about Greek-speaking widows, class divisions in the Epistle of James. Lists of names in Acts and Paul's letters show diversity in ethnic origin, social background, gender and political affiliation. For

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/sanctum/nov10>;  
<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/blacksheep/sep11>;  
<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/blacksheep/jun13>; all accessed 6/3/14.

Padilla, the New Testament Church is not united by cultural sameness but by a common commitment to Christ which enabled the Church to overcome all the differences that might have separated them. As Giles (1995:184) has shown, there was in fact a profound sense of connection between smaller groupings and the wider Church, evidenced in part by Paul's use of *ekklesia* to refer to all the Christians in a given location as a term of address.

Thirdly, there is a genuine question mark, when reading Fresh Expressions literature, about whether it is really possible to lift an "essence" of Church out of the New Testament and re-apply it today, naively ignoring 2000 years of development, and the way church has been mediated through history. Such an approach is not only fraught with hermeneutical problems, it is also arguably partly a denial of the work of the Spirit throughout history (Percy, 2008; Davison & Milbank, 2010).

Finally, as Davison and Milbank (2010) contend, the appeal to the incarnation within Fresh Expressions literature (often phrased as "the incarnational principle") can be problematic – Croft (2008a:10) talks about the incarnation of Jesus as "going to where people are and engaging with them on their own terms". Fresh Expressions might well be understood as a way of contextualising faith and branding it in a way that is accessible to particular cultural groups. The "going out" in this is unproblematic, but the language of "engaging with them on their own terms" as an approach to contextualisation appears to miss the question of whether the Gospel is always compatible with every aspect of a culture. As Davison and Milbank (2010:78f) rightly ask:

...we have to ask in what way the incarnation can serve as a *general* principle at all. It is a supremely specific event, which stands outside any general pattern. In any case, the Incarnation cannot be left to stand alone. Severed from the cross and Resurrection, and turned into a "principle", it becomes a blessing for vague "inclusiveness". The Incarnation never served this purpose in full blooded Catholic or Protestant theology. The irony is that the evangelicals of the Fresh Expressions school are in danger of taking over a supposedly "Catholic" notion at its weakest and most liberal. As de Lubac comments, we should not put forward the Incarnation without the cross and Resurrection: that is, without judgement and transformation.

It is important to note that not all Fresh Expressions theorists are as loose in their handling of the incarnation as a principle to inform mission - Hirsch (2003:37) qualifies the incarnation as the missional means by which the Gospel can become a genuine part of a

people group by adding that it is important not to compromise the truth of the Gospel whilst identifying with a particular group. However, he also assumes that “innate cultural frameworks” will not be damaged in this encounter. Whilst it is true that there is a difference between damage and transformation – challenge or change to a cultural framework is not necessarily the same as “damage” – some commentators might well argue that Hirsch is being naive here. However, Hirsch does remind us of the importance of being nuanced in the use of the incarnation as a model for contextualisation – just as use of a shared meaning system does not necessarily mean use of a *fully* shared system, so in the incarnation, humanity is met with the “wholly Other”, an otherness not domesticated within the assumed culture but which rather stands among *and* over, and can challenge and transform the culture of the day.

### **6.3.3 – Contextualisation and its challenges – the Gospel and culture**

It is clear then that wielding thin notions of the incarnation and utilising the homogenous unit principle could pose a risk to the gospel. Locally branding and closely contextualising expressions of faith can be positive in reminding us of the contingent nature of all theology, but if contextualisation goes too far it risks leading to an uncritical celebration of an infinite number of contextual and mutually exclusive theologies (relativism), the risk that suspicion of the Biblical text by context could lead to a silencing of the text (and therefore the gospel) and the risk that pioneers might forget that the gospel often calls us to be “out of step” with the world around (Bosch, 1991:427). Bosch’s remedy is that the catholicity of the Church and interaction between different contexts can provide a counter-balance to over-contextualisation. Whilst Broomhead did not invoke this language, this kind of methodology was clearly present in his mind when he stressed the importance of the link to the wider Anglican Church as a safeguard in the establishment of Sanctum, cited earlier.<sup>59</sup> It is a necessary interaction to preserve if the creedal Trinitarian faith, what Bosch (1991:427) calls the “universal and context-transcending dimensions of all theology” needs to be respected and preserved to remain authentically Christian.

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/sanctum/nov10>; <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/blacksheep/sep11>; <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/blacksheep/jun13>; all accessed 6/3/14. Cf. also my previous mention of the work of Hiebert (1987, 2008) on critical contextualisation in chapter 5.

This tension between the Gospel and culture is inherent to the being of church – as “belonging to the field of tension between the history of Christ and contemporary history”. (Moltmann 1977:67). In fact, whilst Moltmann (1978) argues strongly for a Church that is of rather than for the people, with its true life coming “from below” rather than “from above”, encouraging every member in full participation, he nevertheless challenges the idea that church might be structured around social principles such as gender, class, ethnicity etc. Unsurprisingly, he is supported in this by Volf (1998) and also Hardy (2001), who argues that the restructuring of social meaning is one of the important tasks of the Church as it gathers, enabling church members to process their “scattered” experiences and take out transformed patterns. “The distinctive character of a church is that it finds the meaning of society in God, and seeks to bring society into closer and closer approximation to the truth of God.” (Hardy, 2001:240)<sup>60</sup> Whether this kind of process can be done in a homogenous unit context rather than a richer, wider Church again brings into question the use of McGavran’s principles and the relation of Fresh Expressions to the broader Church of which they are a part; it suggests that branding faith in such a way needs to be done thoughtfully and with the limitations of a focussed church group in mind, although it does not render Fresh Expressions as invalid when taken as part of a wider picture. Much like criticisms of the Alpha course, “a lot depends on who is running it”, how aware they are of these issues and how they work to mitigate these weaknesses.

#### **6.3.4 - Fresh Expressions and Ecclesiology**

In addition to theological questions around the Homogenous Unit Principle, Milbank and Davison (2010:42) note particular concerns about soteriology and ecclesiology. As well as concerns about the prioritising of choice over givenness, they argue that Fresh Expressions ignores the Church as part of the goal of salvation and marginalise the Church as part of the means. This feels a slightly unfair criticism – it is not always unclear why the New Testament metaphors to which Davison and Milbank appeal (Body, Bride, Temple, People of God, New Israel and New Jerusalem) might relate to traditional institutional Church of

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<sup>60</sup> Hardy (2001:79ff) is also very interesting on the way in which the diversity across the Anglican Church has been able to embody several different “logics” or “ideas” of being church within itself contemporaneously – “the sociality of evangelical catholicity” – an important characteristic when thinking about the question of fresh expressions, branding faith and ecclesiology. A mixed-economy of church expressions are able hold one another in mutual-critical correlative enquiry.



England forms and not Fresh Expressions. This of course, raises an important question about Davison and Milbank's ecumenical perspective. As well as being too optimistic about how the practices of parishes church work in reality, their liturgical approach assumes an Anglican "parish communion" model of worship – problematic vis à vis ecumenical approaches to church, but also inconsistent in relation to the ways in which patterns of worship have changed over the years in the Church of England.

From a contrasting Baptist tradition, Ellis (2004:256) argues that whereas many have tended to see church as gathered around written liturgical texts and with normative place given to the eucharist, church is in fact – regardless of tradition - constituted in the gathering of disciples in the name of Jesus with attention to Scripture, openness to the Spirit of God to meet God and seek his Kingdom. This model sees the church as a community of disciples who yearn for the Kingdom of God, and seek to express the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their common life and worship with its creative tension between Word and Spirit, between scriptural command and loving encounter. It is a model he invites Christians from all traditions to experiment with to see how it interacts with their own liturgical tradition – and a model that, without seeking to influence the style of worship, invites churches to question themselves on matters of personal devotion, attention to Scripture and communal approach to worship as members of a body who struggle with Scripture and yearn to come closer to God and to his will. This augments the perspective of Volf (1998:176), who builds on this and also begins to answer Milbank and Davison's reservations about choice, when he argues that it is the Spirit who constitutes the Church, with faith as gift, coming together but (crucially) also remaining together. Being gathered through the Spirit, the church is much more than simply a collection of individuals – there is a commitment to being together that shapes and challenges individual and social life. As Padilla (1982:24) put it:

"Membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes and dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a new humanity under the lordship of Christ. Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God simultaneously introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. "The unifier is Jesus Christ and the unifying principle is the 'Gospel'".

In actual fact, criticism of Milbank and Davison's attack on Fresh Expressions ought to be wider than simply rebutting their claims about ecclesiology. Their work is a helpful

reminder that all praxis ought to be rooted in rigorous theological reflection, and there are dangers in some cases that sociology might be elevated over theology, insufficient thought about embracing culture, a lack of appreciation for faith-shaping liturgical form (perhaps linked to a desire for novelty above truth), and concessions to an over individualistic consumerism. However, a critical weakness of their argument is that they appear to lump all Fresh Expressions in one basket when in reality, due to their very nature as contextually focussed expressions of church, Fresh Expressions are of course extremely diverse. Despite acknowledgements to the contrary, there is a danger that they present an overly positive view of the parish ministry they perceive to be under threat, and pay insufficient regard to the wider variety of ministries (such as HE and hospital chaplaincies) that have always formed a part of the Church of England's presence within the UK. Moreover, as Cray (2011) points out, the vast majority of Fresh Expressions in the Church of England are new congregations planted by parish churches and most of the remainder are deanery or diocesan initiatives. Fresh expressions often serve as an extension of the ministry of these parishes and deaneries, helping them to remain true to their calling to be the church for all.<sup>61</sup> The link between traditional churches and Fresh Expressions is often clear. Cray also disputes Milbank and Davison's assertion that the report *Mission-Shaped Church* presents an inadequate and individualised understanding of salvation, arguing that *Mission-shaped Church* was about the 'Church' in mission in a changing context - not about individualized salvation - precisely because "salvation has an ecclesial dimension."<sup>62</sup>

In this respect, the key issue remains the dilemma between the missiological desire to contextualise the Gospel, and the ecclesiological imperative to ensure both that the Gospel message is not compromised by the medium, and that mature expressions of church are sufficiently diverse to enable growth to maturity. Although Cray (2011) is right to point out that the link between traditional churches and Fresh Expression that have emerged from

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/cen/201011parish>, accessed 10/3/14

<sup>62</sup> Cray further notes that *Mission-shaped Church*, quoting *Eucharistic Presidency*, affirmed that the Church is 'a genuine foretaste of God's kingdom' and argues that Milbank and Davison (2010) suggest that fresh expressions' thinking prioritizes the Kingdom over the Church in such a way that the church is reduced to less than its biblical dignity and identity. He refutes this, and argues that in fact, Milbank and Davison are in equal danger of collapsing the Kingdom into the Church. It is also interesting to note that Cray emphasises at the beginning the length of his ministry and previous experience as a parish priest. Milbank and Davison critique what they perceive as a lack of rigorous theology in Fresh Expressions, but one could equally turn this round and point out that whilst their theoretical points are important, as commentators on praxis, neither of them have had vast experience of actual, on the ground, leadership of parishes.

<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/cen/201011parish>, accessed 10/3/14

them is currently clear, as Fresh Expressions get older it is envisaged that they will increasingly have a life of their own. Staunch opponents of using the Homogenous Unit Principle do not dispute that they can have their place in mission (Zizioulas, 1993, Davison and Milbank, 2010). But how much diversity is needed within a “gathering” in order for it to be authentically church, and what kind of relationship does this gathering need with the wider church – other gatherings – in order to belong to the body of Christ?

Returning again to our previous discussions of RCT and social capital, it is within this debate that we also see the problems of reducing religious phenomena into primarily sociological categories. Homogenous church might make sense within Iannone's (1997) more limited vision of RCT if conversion and capitalist gain is the only consideration, but if a solely RCT-based rationale is used to explain what is happening it actually does violence to the very essence of the church people are joining. Not only is the cultural logic of capitalism within RCT somewhat exposed in this, but many Christians might further argue that the growth has come for them precisely in the wrestling with difference – i.e. in the remaining in a church even though it is costly, and would not make the most of their social capital in the way that RCT might argue they would. Milbank (2008) argues that any attempt to plant church in a homogenous group misses a fundamental transformational issue - calling people to ‘come to church’ rather than simply planting where they are is important because the refusal to come out of oneself and go to church is simply the refusal of church per se.

Reading Milbank does make one suspect that his notion of church is perhaps somewhat nostalgic and parochial in its conception, but his reference to Paul's writing to Corinth or Galatia rather than a particular club or society does highlight the mixed rather than homogenous nature of the New Testament church. Zizioulas (1993:255) agrees on this point, arguing that Church only happens “in gatherings where all ages, sexes, professions, cultures etc. meet, for that is what the Gospel promises us to be the Kingdom of God.” However, although this eschatological vision sounds grand in principle, in reality, even in a traditional local church, the particularity of a time and place will often mean that a church is fairly homogenous in practice in terms of culture, style, demographic etc., even if this is not its intent (as commentators arguing for the creation Fresh Expressions often note, in fact – see, e.g, Frost and Hirsch, 2003). Frost and Hirsch (2003:53) helpfully argue that whilst they would advocate the Homogenous Unit Principle as an initial mission strategy, heterogeneity

also needs to be a goal in order to help the congregation to mature in their discipleship. I concur wholeheartedly with this. Wigg Stevenson (2007:206) offers the termination of Willow Creek's Axis programme as one concrete expression of how reaching out to people in a culturally specific consumer space has proven inadequate to lead them into a mature discipleship. Although the Axis program succeeded in creating "a Generation X church-within-a-church", over time "Axis adults" did not connect with the rest of the congregation and "found it hard to transition" into the larger body when they became too old for the ministry's age-based demographic – by marketing to niche groups, Willow Creek had institutionalised fragmentation.<sup>63</sup>

I would also add that although it is a challenge, heterogeneity needs realising in reality, not simply naming as an aspiration and then relegating to an eschatological future. Padilla's (1982) contention that unity in principle cannot exist unless it is embodied in practice is reinforced by Moltmann's (1977) point that within the church, eschatology should not be confined to the future but allowed break into and shape the present in an endless dialectic of reforming the Church so that in its life, it becomes closer to its intended future. The identity of the Church is both eschatological *and* historical at one and the same time: "the contradiction is not paradoxically perpetuated but is grasped as a tension which presses towards its own resolution in the new creation, where righteousness dwells." This paradox leads to a struggle for truth, but never to accepting and justifying an "unholy condition": the eschatological vision is what enables the Church to know what to struggle towards in changing and re-shaping its present (Moltmann, 1977:23).

It is clear that that whilst inculturating the gospel might well be understood as an appropriate response to Christ's Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20), without proper reflection (and in a worst case scenario) these expressions and brands of faith could end up mirroring rather than challenging unhelpful aspects of consumer culture. Branding faith need not compromise the message, but a vision of a united, complete eschatological church will ultimately challenge any pattern of church that encourages separation and segregation in

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<sup>63</sup> Moynagh (2012:147) may make a helpful distinction when he points out the difference between the *esse* and the *bene esse* of church – between the essence of church and what is necessary for the well-being of a church. Moynagh is referring to small communities, but the point might equally be raised for Homogenous Units – a homogenous church may well meet the relational criteria for church but be too culturally narrow to provide its members with an ample experience of ecclesial life. Only as it connects to a wider body will members enjoy the fuller blessings of being part of the body of Christ, and mature in their faith as they engage with difference.

the present. There is space for a mixed economy of church, but the Church of England needs to work hard on ensuring that it remains a *both/and* church not an *either/or* one in its “mixed economy”. In an Anglican context, creative deanery leadership and stronger links both with originating churches and local, diocesan and national networks are key to this, as well as church leaders who are reflective practitioners, rooted within the Anglican tradition. Wagner (1978:18) suggests ways in which this can be done in practice, being realistic about culturally different expressions of worship whilst maintaining an essential unity. It is possible to build churches with both culture-specific and culture-transcending dimensions. Affirming, with Schnabel (2008:404ff; cf Gal 3:28) that the Apostle Paul was committed to building churches in which social divisions were overcome, one can see in places such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome and beyond a dialogue between the localised, smaller, more culture-specific meetings and larger, supra-cultural gatherings (Meeks, 2003; Gehring, 2004; Finger, 2007; Jewett, 2007; Moynagh, 2012).

These kinds of examples are crucial if the Gospel that is proclaimed through the focussed branding of Fresh Expressions is truly to embody reconciliation. To focus an expression of church so narrowly that those who do not fit in to a particular network are not included within it risks splitting reconciliation into a vertical dimension where reconciliation happens with God, and a horizontal dimension, where reconciliation only happens with “people like us”. But as Bosch (1991:169) argues,

“The church is that community of people who are involved in creating new relationships among themselves and in society at large and, in doing this, bearing witness to the lordship of Christ. He is no private or individual Lord, but always, as Lord of the church, also Lord of the world.”

#### **6.4 – Branding Faith, Ecclesiology, and Fresh Expressions – some conclusions**

In this chapter, we have continued to explore the theological issues that have emerged from our data in relation to branding faith. We began by examining whether faith brands such as New Wine and Spring Harvest augmented the role of the local church, and concluded that although there were challenges – particularly to ecclesiology, when faith brands incorporate networks and wield power within an institution – this was nothing new in church history, and faith brands paid a mainly positive and complimentary role to the life of the local church. We have also explored some of the issues that branding local Fresh Expressions raise, exploring them because they offer an interesting counter point to the “McDonaldised” faith brands such as Alpha discussed in the previous chapter. Contextualisation – and particularly, utilising the Homogenous Unit Principle – brings definite risks to the integrity of the living out of the Gospel and to traditional ecclesiology. Criticisms of Fresh Expressions were noted and responded to, and a critical affirmation of Fresh Expressions methodology was offered, albeit with the suggestion that Homogenous Unit Principle methodology might be more appropriate in the stage of mission and outreach, but that in order to mature and fully reflect the gospel, churches needed to move towards heterogeneity in order both to help the congregation to mature in their discipleship and also in order that the church might reflect the gospel’s message of reconciliation in both a horizontal and a vertical axis of relationships.

Our final words in this chapter perhaps ought to go to Bishop Thierry, who offers warm support for branding faith whilst nevertheless being aware of the limitations and particular emphases that different faith brands will offer. He clearly locates responsibility for mediating and assisting people through this process within the church, and church leaders in particular. He also reminds us that each and every church has its own limitations and particular emphases. This does not remove responsibility from faith brands for trying their best to ensure they are as holistic as possible in their presentation of the faith, but does serve to illustrate that they have value in the right role and the right context:

*Bishop Thierry: Most movements are light in some areas, but my task as a Bishop, your task as a local church leader is to take people on their journey of discipleship, er, and to see what the missing*

bits are. And as you do that, you, you get the whole picture. And that's actually the same paradigm as the book of Acts, you know.

*"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became a Christian?"*

*"Well no, actually, we didn't."*

*"Okay, well, let's sort that one out." You know?*

*"Which baptism did you receive?"*

*"Well, only the baptism of John."*

*"Well okay, let's sort that one out"*

*Our whole lives are about making sure that people get a holistic Christianity and not missing out on some bits, and the accusation that brands are deficient is only to say that the whole church is deficient in some way. God raises up movements to be a ginger, a, a, a way of pressing particular things, and, er, because we have a Trinitarian faith we want to bring people into the wholeness of that Trinitarian faith. I don't, I don't think it is any different from the kind of cartoon thing of saying that "Catholics are big on the Father, Evangelicals are big on the Son, and Charismatics are big on the Holy Spirit".*

In our next chapter, we will now move from exploring and dealing with criticisms or strands that have emerged from the data or existing studies on faith brands to a more positive attempt to construct an emergent "theology of faith brands".

## 7 – Towards a Theology of Branding

So far in this study we have argued that although there are dangers associated with branding faith, faith brands appear to have been more beneficial than harmful to the Christian faith of our focus group participants. We have explored concerns that branding faith might present a reductionist account of the Gospel, or undermine traditional ecclesiology, and argued that this need not be the case, whilst acknowledging the potential dangers that faith brands bring in these areas. We have suggested that brands can play a positive and complementary role to the life of the local church, and compared the branding of Fresh Expressions as a counter point to the “McDonaldised” faith brands such as Alpha. We have also suggested that whilst all faith brands are limited by their particular emphasis and their local execution, this is true of all expressions of faith.

In this chapter, we move on from tackling criticisms of faith brands to offer a constructive theology of faith brands. This theology is indicative rather than exhaustive in nature, and has a number of strands in mapping out the beginnings of what such a theology might look like. It includes the example of Paul’s contextual missionary flexibility, and is rooted in a theology of creation that is realistic about the fallenness of the world, whilst taking seriously the need to engage with society as and where people are. Cavanaugh’s (2008) Augustinian Framework is used as a way of understanding freedom, desire and the role of faith brands as a way of drawing people to a true end (*telos*) – God – and it is suggested that faith brands play a role in a process that Gorringe (2001) might term as “the education of desire” towards God. Finally, the notion of the *missio Dei* and the pneumatological understanding of theologians such as Bosch (1991) and Sherry (2002) are offered as ways of understanding of how God works through human culture and human creativity in the creation of faith brands. As we explore these strands, we will see how they resonate with the data from our study in order to argue theologically that God is indeed at work in and through Christian faith brands as a way of drawing people to himself.



## **7.1 – Part of a created order: missionary flexibility and the presentation of the gospel in context**

### **7.1.1 – Faith brands: all things to all people?**

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup>To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup>To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup>To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

*1 Corinthians 9:19-23*

Taken in isolation, Paul's words appear to offer a justification for utilising faith branding such as the Alpha course in order to share the gospel in a consumer culture; or as a support for notions such as the Homogenous Unit Principle. Certainly, it is not uncommon for them to be used in arguments relating to the need to contextualise the Gospel – and they form a central part of the Church of England's introduction to Fresh Expressions.<sup>64</sup> Barratt (1971, 1992) rightly points out that in context, Paul is making a point about the way in which even an apostle will renounce their rights in relation to the Gospel – specifically, in this case, to his decision to refrain from eating meat because of controversy related to food that had been sacrificed to idols. As Thiselton (2000) observes however, Paul's freedom in Christ is linked to a call to a cruciform, Christlike life in relation to others – “apostolic witness” concerns life as well as word, reflecting the priority of Christology over ecclesiology in Paul. Christian identity is found in an act of identification with Christ (Moltmann, 1974:19). The apostolic and ecclesial identity does not exist in and for itself: Paul is engaging in voluntary restraint for the greater good.

Nevertheless, an important corollary of this is the principle of missionary accommodation and flexibility in the proclamation and contextualisation of a Gospel message (Thiselton, 2000:702; Jewett, 1982; Mitchell, 1992). Barrett (1971:211) makes a similar point, although he (following a tradition that dates back to Chrysostom) locates Paul too insecurely within

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<sup>64</sup> See, <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/introduction>; and elsewhere, where they are used to support arguments about the need for contextualisation in <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/endbeginning>

his Judaism, as Garland (2003:430) observes – Paul is not simply suggesting that he occasionally obeyed Jewish customs to decoy Jews into listening to his message. Accommodation is not absolute antinomianism (Carson, 1986), although as Hays (1997) and Thiselton (2000) observe, the substance of his message suggests a change in identity where being “in Christ” leads him to a position that transcends all cultural allegiances.<sup>65</sup> As Ciampa and Rosner (2010) note, Paul is clearly demonstrating that he adapts his approach according to the community to which he is ministering. However, this does not contradict his statements elsewhere that he is committed to pleasing God rather than humans (Gal 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4); nor is it a “licence for unlimited flexibility” (Carson, 1986). Rather, it suggests that although 1 Corinthians 9 relates to a specific context, Fresh Expressions pioneers are not unwarranted in their adoption of it as part of the rationale for their missionary methodology. Christian faith brands, at their best, can justifiably be seen as an attempt to tread a similar path. Reflecting on what emerged from our focus groups, there certainly appeared to be a recognition that faith brands represented a creative attempt to share the Gospel with different contexts – as we saw, for example, in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Dee’s conviction that in a brand saturated age, if the church is going to share faith in a way that is relevant to younger people, the church will need to utilise branding because it is such a central feature of the culture they are growing up in, or in Edna and Edie’s conversation about the way in which differentiation between styles of church is so important nowadays in enabling people to find a church to belong to – they do not simply go to the “local” church, they actively choose a church that connects with them at a cultural level. Engaging as “Christian faith brand to consumer” resonates not simply with Paul’s “Jew to Jew, Greek to Greek” but also incarnational theology – faith being embodied in a culture in space and time (and with the attendant complexities this involves, already discussed in our previous chapters in relation to the challenges of contextualisation).

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<sup>65</sup> cf. Gal 2:15; Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13. In fact, Carson (1986), building on Hooker (1982) argues that Paul occupies a *third ground* and, so far as law is concerned, is prepared to move from that ground to become like a Jew or like a Gentile, because in his relationship to Torah he is neither one nor the other. For the purposes of this thesis, debating the exact nature of Paul’s relationship to the law is not a key issue, however – what is important to clarify is whether Paul adapted and tailored his approach to different contexts in ways that are analogous to the kinds of arguments employed by Fresh Expressions pioneers, or proponents of faith brands.

### **7.1.2 – creation, sin and grace – the complex fallenness of a consumer society**

Any theology that seeks to reflect on the Gospel and culture needs to be rooted within a theological tradition that takes seriously the doctrine of creation, and the possibilities of both sin and grace, fall and redemption. Luther's assertion that human beings are *simul justus et peccator* finds expression within Moltmann's doctrine of creation when he notes that the human being is at once in God's image and a sinner (1985:229). For Moltmann as for Luther, sin might pervert the human being's relationship with God, but it does not destroy it, and as God's image, human beings are the image of the whole Trinity in that they are "conformed" to the image of the Son: the Father creates, redeems and perfects human beings through the Spirit in the image of the Son (1985:233, 243). The opening chapter of Colossians extends this further into the work of the cosmic Christ in redeeming the whole of creation (Col 1:15-20). Faith brands, as part of creation, similarly embody both aspects. They are products of a fallen world, but can be infused with grace nonetheless.

This is important, because within a doctrine of creation that takes both sin and the goodness of the created order seriously, we do nevertheless affirm when we begin a theology of branding that it is possible to view worldly systems as infused with the possibility of grace. It is impossible to consider faith branding without at least making reference to some of the criticisms of consumer culture, since by definition, branding faith involves utilising a capitalist methodology to propagate the message of the gospel. Lynch (2002) suggests that capitalism – and more pertinently, consumer culture - is bound up with four particularly significant and interconnected difficulties for Christian faith. Firstly, unjust social and economic practices, including global systems of production that undermine human rights and well-being (see also, e.g., Klein, 2000; Bhattacharya, Gabriel and Small, 2002). Secondly, the capacity of consumption to affect our capacity to live in meaningful and spiritually healthy ways – offering us instead palliative care, distraction and superficial defences against the aimlessness and anxiety of contemporary existence (cf. Starkey, 1997; Ritzer, 1999; Bauman, 2000). Lynch cites Carroll (1999:131f), who observes:

Much of the dreaming encouraged by shopping is escapist. Its invitation is to withdraw from reality, its tarnished hopes, its gruelling routines, most things unrewarding, all less than ideal. In reverie, one may find perfection... [W]hile the shopping ritual is not fundamentally materialistic, the dreams it conjures up fail to engage with sacred forces. At the most ego is fulfilled for a moment, as when the

new dress metamorphoses her into a princess. There is fun and there is fancy, there is magic, even enchantment, but it is not that of the flight of the soul into union with another, or with the grander divine order. Perhaps this is why consumerism induces restlessness. It offers so much, almost everything in terms of fantasy, but not the true consolation of grace.

Thirdly, Lynch notes that critics of consumer culture link the socio-economic and existential-spiritual objections in Marx's concept of the "fetishism of the commodity" (Edwards, 2000:17; Marx, 1844). Marx argued that the suffering of the working classes was caused by the fact that the workers had lost control of the means of production and were therefore alienated from the process and products of their labour – with capitalism perpetuating itself in part by selling commodities back to the workers who produced them with the implied promise that they will make their lives happier. Brands play a key role in attaching the symbolic value and enchantment around these commodities – but in drawing a veil over their production, make it harder for consumers to identify unjust means of production (Lury, 1996; 2004; see also Klein, 2000, 2002). I agree with this, although would add that on the other hand, there are also instances where brands have provided an interface through which consumers can engage corporations in relation to social justice issues, since brands by their very nature offer a focus for campaigning against (Arminas, 2001).<sup>66</sup>

Fourthly, and again, clearly related to what has been previously argued, consumer culture is not only an ineffectual way of dealing with the anxieties of contemporary existence, but in fact, is a significant contributing cause of those anxieties and difficulties. Bauman (2000) argues that by facing consumers with an array of lifestyle choices, consumer society makes it harder to live with a sense of conviction or security. As "life consumers" we shift from one set of choices or relationships to another, and the main consequence of this is "an ever-growing volume of broken, loveless and broken lives." (Bauman, 2000:90).

Taken together, Lynch argues that these four objections suggest that consumer culture can function as a closed system in which the existential uncertainties it generates serve to deepen our desire to find comfort through commodities. This in turn can lead us to find comfort in the "enchanted" qualities of these commodities – a process in which branding

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<sup>66</sup> The notion of "Adbusting" provides a further example of this; see, e.g., Klein (2000:279-81; 284-86). The co-opted brand becomes the medium through which the counter-capitalist message is expressed.

plays a major role – and fail to see the unjust means through which those commodities are produced (2002:7). In taking comfort in these “enchanted” qualities, perhaps it may be argued, to reference Wink (1984, 1986, 1992), that we give the powers power. The way in which brands play a role in encouraging this, and are able to “build relationships with consumers” makes one reflect on the language of the “powers” in the New Testament (cf. Eph 6:11-13; Col 1:15-17; Col 2:14-16; see also Wink, 1984, 1986, 1992). Literature about brands often makes them sound like *hypostases* with a life of their own, albeit that like the New Testament “powers”, these powers are not ultimate, but provisional and temporal. Wink’s (1984, 1986, 1992) analysis of the language of the “powers” in the New Testament and surrounding literature is insightful in that it takes seriously both the physical, institutional and social aspects of the powers, without fully giving way to the temptation to “demythologise” and ignore the less tangible, immaterial or “spiritual” aspects of them.

...the “principalities and powers” are the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power. As the inner aspect they are the spirituality of institutions, the “within” of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organisations of power. As the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the “chair” of an organisation – in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes. Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form – be it a church, a nation or an economy – and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. Neither pole is the cause of the other. Both come into existence together and cease to exist together. When a particular Power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God’s purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic. (Wink, 1984:5)

For Wink (1984), the role of the church is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purpose in the world, so that (Eph 3:10) “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places.”<sup>67</sup> It is not hard to see how Wink’s argument could be applied to branding as brands

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<sup>67</sup> Of course, Wink’s conception of the principalities and powers has itself been subject to critical debate. It is perhaps helpful that he recognises the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the physical, and certainly reflects the world of Luke-Acts, where the demonic opposition and the Kingdom of God as expressed in Christ and the Apostles is always embodied. But it is arguable that he draws too heavily on Jungian psychology (Cook, :175), and although Wink himself is at pains to deny it, there is a danger that post-modern demythologising could be seen to reduce the place of the supernatural to the unconscious of humanity – leaving, in reality, no ontological reality for angels and demons as self-existent beings, and potentially God himself (see, e.g., Thiselton, (1995:81), and his discussion of Cupitt for an example of how this has played out in the contemporary church in a different way and “subsumed God within the human consciousness as a projection of value.”). It also makes some of the more explicit passages in the New Testament hard to interpret, because, as Ferdinando (1996) states, “it is indeed difficult to see how the New Testament writers could have communicated more clearly than they did in their references to Satan, demons and powers, they had in mind personal spirit beings – highlighted in Angel’s (2012) study of ancient Jewish and Christian texts. Moreover, as Clark (1997) has argued, Luke-Acts often personifies evil in people, not simply systems – references to Satan and to exorcisms are of beings that exist within a person and then leave, (cf., e.g., Lk 4; Lk 8:26ff) and the power of the Holy Spirit ultimately came from the spiritual realm (cf., e.g., the

play their role in embodying and providing form and personality for different organisations or products. If the role of the church is to unmask idolatry where it is found, then brands must be judged in relation to their capacity to offer life, and that which is genuine, true and beautiful or to distract from that which brings life, and collude with systems of oppression. In reality of course, in a fallen world, they have the potential to do both - and as Lynch (2002:8) rightly notes, there are in any case counterpoints and limitations to many of the negative claims that are made about consumerism itself.

Edwards (2000:190) has observed that commentators on consumer society are often theorists rather than empirical researchers; and much empirical research on the detail of shopping (and therefore, how consumer culture functions in real life settings) contrasts quite sharply with theoretical accounts of consumer culture and their description of shopping in terms of self-gratification or self-expression. Miller's (1998) anthropological study of shopping in north London is a case in point, arguing that shopping functioned for those people not as a way of constructing identity, but as a form of ritual of love and sacrifice in which their attention was directed to a real or imagined other person and towards more general values to which they wanted to dedicate themselves. The focus on the preferences of the "other" in Miller and the concept of the "treat" as indicative that work was, in fact, work that deserved a reward and not simply an enjoyable and potentially self-serving leisure activity. This is very significant when thinking about how people actually use brands actually use brands in practice, because it suggests that they are much more ironic and functional in their attitude towards them and that consumption is rather less magical in practice than theorists might like us to believe.

In addition, with Lynch (2002:8), I would contend that broader theoretical generalisations also risk under-estimating the importance of human agency in cultural processes. Our four strands offer a picture of individuals caught within a cultural system that creates malaise, offers ineffectual relief, and obscures the fundamental injustices on which the system rests; the person here becomes a passive one, and our consumer culture becomes, as in Adorno & Horkheimer's (1979) notion of the *Kulturindustrie*, a means of social control and pacifying dissent. In reality, of course, the picture is more complex than that; in part, at least,

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encounter with Simon the Magician in Acts 8:9-24). Wink remains, nevertheless, a useful starting point from which to reflect on the reality and role of principalities and powers both in the New Testament and the world today. I am enormously grateful to The Ven Sarah Clark, Archdeacon of Nottingham, for sharing her reflections on Wink from her MTh thesis.

because the world has become far more personalised and customised than Adorno & Horkheimer's standardised vision of a world dominated by mass communication suggested (cf. Pine II (1993), Pine II & Gilmore (1999)), but more significantly, because there are clear examples of resistance and dissent in more detailed studies for us to accept that simply presenting human participants in consumer culture as "cultural dupes" is anything other than an inadequate picture. A glance at recent marketing or globalisation literature also quickly dispels the notion that consumers are powerless, or unaware of the costs and benefits of living in a globalised, consumer culture; the rise of the Fair Trade movement and numerous stories about the increasing ethical demands being made on companies highlight the fact that consumers do possess awareness and do hold producers to account for the way in which their brands behave, even if the power balance in these struggles is a difficult one (see, e.g., Hoch and Deighton, (1989), Jones (2000), Klein, (2000; 2002), Chaudhuri and Holbrook, (2001), de Chernatony, (2001), Heslem, (2002; 2004 (ed.)), Quart (2003)).

The evidence from the above may vary in its scope and intensity, but it is clear that people are asking questions about their consumption habits, and the idea that consumer culture will continue to sustain itself as a closed system cannot simply be assumed (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Moreover, whilst observing the contrast in interpretation between more general theoretical literature and empirical studies, we must note that from the data in this particular study, participants appear to demonstrate a high level of awareness about brands, about some of the problems of living in a consumer society, and suggested that they exercised agency and discernment in their engagement with consumer culture and branding. In the words of Arminas, (2001), "bad behaviour can hurt your brand."

For Lynch (2002:11), de Certeau's notion of resistant, "tactical" forms of consumption provides a conceptual basis for making sense of consumption as an experience that is both a positive and morally questionable act – holding together the two poles of sin and grace we have thus far been exploring. This is because de Certeau sees consumption as an active process on the part of the consumer, in which understanding the "uses" that consumers make of what they consume is crucial to an understanding of processes and power in contemporary culture. As Lynch (2002:9) notes, a recurrent theme in de Certeau's work involves exploring how those lacking in formal economic and political power in a given social context find ways of "refusing to accord the established order the status of a law, a meaning,

or a fatality” (de Certeau, 1984:26). These “tactics” are manoeuvres in enemy territory that take place when people find themselves in an environment which is not of their design and which they have no formal power to change – precisely the kind of environment that consumer culture constitutes, since it is a cultural system from which escape is impossible and in which resistance through tactical consumption becomes the only means of expressing hope and humanity.

The global capitalist economy and the consumer society that underpins it is such a foundational part of human existence that it is difficult to imagine anything that can make a significant change to it – as Bauman (2000:4) notes, the liquefying processes of modernity appear to have run their course at the level of social organisation, leaving it hard to imagine or enact alternatives to the current social structure. As Lynch observes, although the anti-globalisation movement exists, it is essentially a cry of protest rather than a coherent articulation of social and economic alternative to global capitalism. In this context, the way in which we choose to consume becomes a way in which human freedom can be expressed – we cannot escape the role of being a consumer altogether, but we can resist the damaging and dehumanizing aspects of consumer culture. The Fair Trade movement is but one example of this – using a process of material consumption against oppressive social and economic practices. Lynch also argues that consumption also holds potential for self-expression, creativity, and other forms of cultural and social resistance. In this regard, there is some resonance with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) who see liberatory potential in consumption practises. Not all scholars would agree with Lynch on this last point - Bauman (2000) is sceptical about the possibility of seeing consumption as a constructive means of self-expression, arguing that the very notion of the “authentic self” that would make such self-expression possible and desirable is itself a social construct reinforced by late modern consumer culture. Lynch (2002:14) acknowledges this, but nevertheless (rightly, in my view) retains a commitment to the metaphor of the “authentic self” as an important expression of what it means to be human – even if one qualifies this with an awareness of the influence of social constructivism. The notion of transcendence – built into the theological vision the underpinned de Certeau’s account of consumption, resistance and “tactics” – is a vital concept where a social order appears so dominant. As Lynch (2002:10) notes,

we may find it hard to get beyond the “facts” of global capitalism and consumer culture, but this does not mean that we can only operate in terms of the dominant



cultural metaphor of “life as shopping”. There is always something that transcends our current social order, even if we cannot articulate clearly what it is, and it is this transcendence that may inspire forms of consumption that are creative, constructive and resistant.

Without denying the complexity of the task, it is precisely this sense of transcendence that allows Lynch to argue for the possibility of being able to “tactically consume” – even in ways that bring pleasure – without necessarily leaving us morally or spiritually compromised. However, beyond an appeal to the resources of the mystical tradition, he does not unpack in detail how this might take place in practice. Hartman (2011), however, develops this in a more concrete fashion, suggesting a fourfold typology to create a coherent Christian ethic of consumption. Firstly, Christians should consume in ways that avoid sin (whether the sin of gluttony to social sins stemming from consumption). Secondly, Christians should use the materials of life in ways that honour and celebrate the goodness and abundance of creation – enjoying the world and all that is in it. This perhaps balances what might be seen as a tendency towards ascetism in our previous point; one can love God both by feasting and fasting. Of course, feasting raises questions about justice and the environment, and this links into her third point, that Christians should practise consumption in ways that reflect love of one’s neighbour. Hartman expands the idea of love of one’s neighbour to include faraway factory sweatshop workers and the love of the natural world (including how consumption practises express our stewardship of the created order and the need to look after the environment and think about questions of sustainability). Fourthly and finally, Hartman offers a broader point, supporting Lynch’s (2002) contention about transcendence – that Christians should judge their consumption by comparing it with their eschatological vision for the future. Hartman (2011:192) argue that we are denizens of the new creation, who can and should align our actions with those of a fulfilled world. We are not - or need not be – greedy, lacking and shallow, and we do not need to believe what consumerism tells us, because Christian faith has an alternative view of human nature. Hartman admits that taken together, there can be contradictions between these four points, but contends that an adequate Christian ethics of consumption must include all four considerations as tools for discernment.

Reflecting for a moment on our data in relation to all this, the evidence from our focus groups shows that our participants were well aware of the “complex fallenness” of the consumer society in which they live – and their reactions to the use of marketing

methodology in the church demonstrated that they could see potential problems, as well as positives associated with it. As we saw, Groups A and C were the most resistant to the idea, and Groups B, D and E the most positive, although all groups demonstrated reflexivity and awareness of the kinds of issues discussed above – in addition to concerns we have already explored, such as reductionism. The exchange between Babs, Bernadette and Brian below illustrates the tensions people felt, as well as their awareness that their personality, temperament, understanding of branding and the way in which branding is used (critically or uncritically) also played a part in their feelings towards it:

*Babs: I'm not for it [churches employing branding or marketing techniques] and that's er – I – I'm - yeah, I'm not keen at all, actually, I, I, almost feel if a things worthwhile it will be seen, you don't need to use modern marketing techniques but I realise you know, that's me*

*Brian: Yeah*

*Babs: and my personality, my temperament. I'm not in the business...*

*Brian: On the other hand...*

*Bernadette: But people are used to now being targeted by marketing, aren't they?*

*Babs: I know, and I go again [sic] it*

*Brian: I think we have to understand what people outside the church respond to,*

*Babs: Mmm*

*Brian: and therefore we have to be culturally relevant that's not to say we have to change the gospel message but the ways we present that have, have got to be attractive to them and if thats something we have to do then I don't have a problem with that any more than I have a problem with bringing modern management techniques into the church because frankly a lot of them actually do work for good reasons and they will work equally well within the church, that is without trying to manipulate people or anything like that, we were looking at change management at PCC how you need to change things within the church,*

*Babs: But it's selecting, isn't' it*

*Brian: Umm*

*Babs: you don't want to go wholesale for management in any of the things*

*Brian: Oh yes, you select which things could benefit what you're doing without trying to manipulate people, yeah, absolutely, but if something will work for you I have no problem in using it, er....*

*Babs: In a way, I mean, we were talking the other day about communication weren't we? That's part of marketing if you like, er, its part of information and that kind of thing (group murmurs of*

agreement). *It dep - to me it depends how far you go on that, and I think you have to be quite selective.*

The eventual conclusion of this conversation as it continued in Group B was agreement that it was not always a bad thing to use branding or marketing techniques, but that each one needed to be weighed up on its merits. In the words of Babs, “you need to quite selective.” Theologically, we might say, there was an acknowledgement that faith brands are part of a flawed system in an imperfect world – but that does not rule out their use (albeit critically) for the church, or within the saving activity of God. To say otherwise is a circular argument – so objections to branding would need to be more specific, and demonstrate that branding is harmful in and of its very nature. My contention is that it is not, but the way in which brands function does need some scrutiny before we move on to our constructive theology of branding.

### ***7.1.3 – brands as a part of consumer society, and the utilisation of branding in faith contexts: means not ends.***

In part this critique is to do with how branding has shifted its role into cultural politics. As we saw in our introduction, historically, branding has been a way of marking a person, animal or thing as someone’s property, and as a way of distinguishing the goods of one producer from another. Increasingly, brands have come to act as agents of communication, connected to a product’s essence, or meaning. Lury (2004) and Moor (2005) have argued that, because of trademark and other legal powers, brands are an entity that insist upon a property form of relationality – potentially superimposing this new form of relationality onto older forms of relationality and power relation (such as class, gender, “race” etc.). The power of these old categories does not necessarily diminish – Lury (2004) argues that it might in fact increase – but it does mean that they also interact with new ones. For Moor, building on Flatley’s (1996) notion of prophylaxis, in which the creation of a public face or persona works as a kind of shield, brands, alongside other commodity objects and images, are the means by which this process takes place. They offer a means of exerting control over the terms of one’s visibility in the public sphere, as well as a way of claiming some kind of “capitalist citizenship”, given how far property in the person depends on the capacity to enter into exchange relations and establish an abstract relationship to one’s body. Moor

(2005:3) contends that brands do this in two main ways – firstly, because brands tend to be constructed along the lines of a personality (Frow, 2003) and secondly, because they operate relationally and offer us opportunities to connect to others. This is potentially problematic because to some extent, the branded adornment of the self depends upon the recognition of others, and often does so in an unevenly distributed way. Moor’s example of Burberry’s brand losing its “aspirational” quality as it is increasingly being worn by “D-list celebrities, topless models and minor actresses” shows that the persistence of taste judgements that attempt to protect class privilege continue to attempt to keep older forms of relationality in place. What is not clear, however, is whether brands offer liberatory potential, or preserve the status quo.

From the evidence in our focus groups, it is harder to see how the faith brands we have looked at possess a “personality” as clear as some commercial brands (such as Nike) – although arguably, one could construct a notional one from the feel of Alpha, for example – but it can certainly be seen how they operate relationally and offer opportunities to connect to others. Group D’s conversation about tribalism, or Vicar 2’s conversation about the Alpha course, were clear examples of how faith brands enabled Christians to identify both connections and also differences within the church. However, even differences need not be seen as problematic in and of themselves – within a Trinitarian framework some differences can be held together and celebrated. In this respect, Christian brands might offer a contrasting, even subversive model, since although they might mark out differences in style or theology, they are not essentially trying to maintain class and taste differences. As we saw earlier, not all would agree with this – our examination of Alpha suggested that if it was used wrongly, aspects of the cultural packaging might well inadvertently introduce some of what Percy (1997) observes as a kind of “home counties” cultural outlook alongside the faith. That said, however, the evidence within our groups appears to be that people were fairly discerning in their engagement with faith brands.

In fact, there are also some clear differences with between the way in which our three faith brands work and the way in which secular brands work; not least, that the pursuit of profit does not appear to be the over-riding concern of Spring Harvest, Alpha and New Wine. The conversation with Bishop Thierry about Spring Harvest’s positioning of itself made it clear that “profit” and “success” were not the criteria by which the organisation measured

itself. In addition, by branding their courses and events, Alpha, New Wine and Spring Harvest are using the clear communicative aspects of branding, but they not seeking to draw a veil over unjust means of production (Lury, 1996; 2004) or colluding with consumer culture's ineffectual way of dealing with the anxieties of contemporary existence (Bauman 2000, Lynch, 2002). Whilst it is right to constantly ask questions about their power, and ask questions about their content and role, these brands are not examples of "the powers" that Wink (1984, 1986, 1992) was concerned about unmasking.

Percy's (2010:70) concerns about Fresh Expressions and their "contemporary obsession with newness, alternatives and novelty" raise the question of whether faith branding will encourage, rather than transform consumerist mindsets? If faith brands simply replicate consumer culture's packaging and distraction, they are part of the problem, not part of the solution. But my contention is that they aren't - all three faith brands we have examined appear to have a genuine desire to lead people *beyond* themselves into Christian discipleship; and to then enable Christians to grow in their relationships with God and live faithfully within the Christian tradition. In other words, we might say, they see themselves as *means*, not *ends*. None of them make exclusive claims to be the sole bearer of Christian truth, and all profess to see the local church as the vital part of people's faith journey (even if some unease was expressed by Vicar 2 about New Wine's ecclesiology). In this respect, these faith brands are trying to operate as risk/anxiety reducers as people seek resources on their journey of faith. We have examined RCT as part of this thesis, and found that as a theory to try to explain the complexity of faith decision-making in its entirety RCT is inadequate, but to the extent that it describes one aspect, rather than the whole story, faith brands undoubtedly do help enable people to make cost/benefit decisions or feel more comfortable about the safety of their social capital as one aspect of their unfolding faith journey. I would, however, accept that the data within this project is limited, and faith branding undoubtedly looks more consumerist in mindset and therefore potentially problematic in other contexts – as Twitchell's (2007) amusing and occasionally horrifying study of marketing and church in the US shows.

In sum, no expression of church or faith brand will be perfect, and some may be very imperfect or have moved beyond orthodox Christian faith altogether. Acknowledging that does not invalidate the whole enterprise of branding faith altogether, however. In the midst

of a fallen, sinful world, within the kind of doctrine of creation outlined by Moltmann (1985) it is possible, without denying the problems late capitalism raises for faith, to see faith branding in a positive way.

## ***7.2 – Faith Brands, Freedom, Christian Desire, Wisdom and Choice - Cavanaugh’s Augustinian Framework as a way of understanding freedom, desire and the role of faith brands***

In drawing out a constructive theology of branding, we return to our earlier passage from I Corinthians 9:19-23, and affirm what faith brands are trying to do – which is reach people with the Gospel or enable them to travel further in their relationships with God. To say this is an affirmation of creation, and Paul’s approach of starting with the world’s way of doing things – even if we acknowledge that the Gospel’s call will leave no aspect of life untouched. Faith brands are not offering a radical alternative to consumer culture – although good Christian brands will inspire Christians into reflexive practice and suggest ways in which the unjust structures of consumer culture might be challenged or reformed.

### ***7.2.1 – Cavanaugh, Augustine, Christian freedom and the telos of consumer society***

To suggest that faith brands have a legitimacy is not simply to accept consumer society as a given and then reflect on how to relate to such a given – although, with Lynch (2002) earlier, I do accept that we cannot escape consumer society altogether. Rather, we need to ensure that we are asking the right questions in order that faith brands might both represent an embodied method for incarnating the gospel, whilst at the same time resisting or subverting the damaging and dehumanizing aspects of consumer culture.

So, as Cavanaugh (2008) contends when thinking about consumer society, this would entail not simply asking, “are we for or against the free market” but also “when is a market free?”; not simply, “should we think of ourselves as consumers” but also “how might we consume rightly?”; not simply “are we for or against globalisation?” but also “how can the church be global and local?”; not simply “how do we live in a world of scarce resources?” but also the question, “should those of us who profess life in Christ accept scarcity as a given?”. It is this

kind of questioning that gives us a bigger view, in place of a resignation that all consumption practices be incorporated into the grand narrative of capitalism. Cavanaugh cites Fair Trade as an example – it could be read simply as a showing the genius of the market to accommodate all kinds of preferences, including a preference to pay a bit more to support a poor farmer; but Christians legitimately narrate the Fair Trade movement differently, as the pursuit of one of the chief ends of human life, that is communion with other persons – not merely the expression of a preference, but the pursuit of an end that is objectively valid, given as it is by God, and not simply chosen.

If we are dealing with a liberal state that professes to be agnostic about the ultimate ends of human life, and if we are not willing to endorse the violent imposition of state socialism, then Christians who are called to witness to a different kind of economics now, in history, beginning in the concrete, local experience of church. There can be no resignation to the way things are. The church is called to be a different kind of economic space and to foster such spaces in the world. This does not mean a “sectarian” withdrawal from the world; Christians are in constant collaboration with non-Christians in making such spaces possible. But there is simply no alternative to the actual creation of cooperatives, businesses and *other organisms* that behave according to the logic of the gospel. The only alternative to blessing or damning “the free market” as such is to create really free markets, economic spaces in which truly and fully free transactions – as judged by the *telos* of human life – can take place. (Cavanaugh, 2008, ix, *italics mine*).

A Christian view of freedom such as this is wider than merely asking whether a transaction is free from state intervention or external coercion (as in a purely economic account of freedom, such as that posited by Friedmann, 1962). In place of an economic account - which Cavanaugh contends lends itself to coercion – he suggests an Augustinian framework in which freedom is understood as embracing the positive end of life in God.

In doing this, Cavanaugh rightly identifies that the market itself has no *telos*, or common end to which desire is directed – indeed, to claim that desires can be ordered rightly or wrongly to objectively desirable ends has no place in a free market. For Hayek (1944), the recognition of the individual does not mean there can be no common action among individuals – but such common action might either be understood as the “coincidence of individual ends” or the achievement of corporate efforts which individuals are willing to contribute in order to achieve the satisfaction of their own desires. Similarly, Novak’s (1982) bleak picture of democratic capitalism is built on the denial of any unitary order –

there is no *telos* above it; the transcendent is not denied, but preserved only in the freedom of each individual to pursue the ends of his or her choice. Cavanaugh argues that the consequence of this is that the choices of ends are made on the basis of “wants, preferences and desires” (2008:6) which may well be real or the artificial creation of advertisers (although as many argue, the artificial creation of wants and needs is not so straightforwardly lucrative or likely in practice – see, e.g. Friedman (1980), Keller (1998), Grant (1999), and de Charnatony (2001)). For many marketers, however, it does not matter how you tell the difference between real wants and artificial wants – all that matters for a market to be free is that individuals have wants and can pursue them without interference from others, especially the state.

Cavanaugh’s application of Augustine on Freedom and Desire in the market offers a richer vision of both. For Augustine, freedom is not simply the absence of external interference – not simply a freedom *from* – but a freedom *for*, a capacity to achieve certain worthwhile goals, all of which are taken up into the one overriding *telos* of human life, the return to God. Freedom is thus fully a function of God’s grace working in us – and being is not simply autonomous, since being involves participating in God, the source of all being. Autonomy in a strict sense is therefore simply impossible, for to be independent of others and independent of God is to be cut off from being, and thus to be nothing at all. To be left to our own devices, cut off from God, is to be lost in sin, which is the negation of being (Cavanaugh, 2008:8). It is in Augustine’s debate against the Pelagians where this is outlined (Augustine, 1955, 1991). For the Pelagians, freedom is a power “external” to God’s grace, and sin is an exercise of that power. For Augustine, sin is not subject to free choice, properly speaking – people can only be free when they are liberated by grace from false desires and moved to desire rightly.

Freedom of choice is not made void but established by grace, since grace heals the will whereby righteousness may freely be loved. (Augustine, 1955a:236)

Freedom is something received, not exercised. Cavanaugh (2008:9) observes that this is a fundamentally different view of desire and freedom from that espoused by the Friedmans (1980) – Augustine does not assume that individuals have wants that are internally generated and subsequently enter the social realm through acts of choice. For Augustine, desire is a complex and multidimensional network of movement, linking the social and the



individual, from both inside and outside the self. Augustine's discussion of the theft of some pears as an adolescent (1991:33f) – linked to his desire also to be associated with the gang in whose company he did it – points both to the social nature of desire, but also the “unreality” of his desire in theological terms. As Cavanaugh observes, because the object of his desire is not orientated to the true end of life, it is in reality, a nothing.

[Augustine's] desire is not endowed with reality simply because he experiences it and chooses on the basis of it. Furthermore, the whole affair – and the desire itself – is not simply transparent to us mortals whose bodies are battlegrounds of competing loves: “Who can untie this extremely twisted and tangled knot?” The answer is God. Only through the sheer grace of God is Augustine able to continue to say, “My desire is for you.” That is, his *real* desire is for God. (Cavanaugh, 2008:10)

If Cavanaugh and Augustine are correct, and there are true desires and false desires, it follows that we need a *telos* to tell the difference between them. Cavanaugh attacks Friedman's (1962; 1980) free market ideology here precisely because in that account, freedom is exercised in the absence of a common *telos*; a market is free if people are free to choose their own ends based on nothing more than their own wants. But within an Augustinian framework, freedom depends not on the autonomy of the will but the end to which the will is moved; and not simply in just following whatever desires we happen to have, but in cultivating the right desires. In Augustine's thought, we desperately need not to be left to the tyranny of our own wills.

### **7.2.2 – Faith brands – influencing the will to a different telos?**

In this respect, faith brands could be affirmed within an Augustinian framework as a way of seeking to influence the will towards to God – and such a framework also helps distinguish faith brands as a counterpoint to other consumer brands because faith brands are a means to a true end (God), whereas in consumerism, the end is simply to continue desiring to buy. Because choice is the only good, because desire is the only thing objectively desirable, desire becomes a desire for nothing (Cavanaugh, 2008:14). Doubtless critics of Alpha would dispute this as too “pure” a conception of what faith brands actually do – and earlier in this thesis we have explored some legitimate concerns about the potential dangers of faith branding, and the way in which faith brands can influence Christians less helpfully in their journey of faith. We have explored criticisms of Alpha's cultural weaknesses, concerns

about Fresh Expressions and the HUP, issues to do with New Wine and ecclesiology to name but a few of these. However, having acknowledged that, like any church, no faith brand is perfect, and acknowledged that each branding methodology will raise difficulties that need to be mitigated as best as they can, the evidence from our focus groups would suggest that significant numbers of people have been moved in a positive direction on their journey of faith by their participation in Alpha, New Wine and other branded faith expressions. Arguably, from an Augustinian perspective, it is the end (*telos*) that would justify faith branding as the means – and on that basis, although each individual faith brand would have to be assessed on their merits, from this study at least, far from selling out the church in the marketplace of desire (à la Milbank, 2008) faith branding can legitimately claim to be an expression of God at work. Participants could clearly point to ways in which they had grown in their relationships with God as a result of their participation in faith brands.

There are dangers in utilising this Augustinian framework, of course. As Cavanaugh notes, Augustine's view could be taken in a paternalistic direction – “we know what you really want, and we are going to organise things accordingly”. The counter-argument to this that in a free market, in the absence of any objective concept of the good, sheer power remains (Cavanaugh, 2008:16). Businesses might like to argue in public that consumers are autonomous and rational and make their choices based on what is best for them, but internally, those who are responsible for their marketing will be arguing to their bosses that they can create a desire for their products and make them sell. That said, as Keller (1998), Grant (1999) and de Charnatony (2001) observe, brands do need to deliver and products do need to work if they are to have value in the eyes of consumers in the long term. Similarly, any suggestion that faith brands might offer a way in which the church might shape people's desires or encourage their wills in the right direction might lay itself open to a charge of Pelegianism (ironic given the Augustinian framework it is emerging from) if not sufficiently nuanced with a pneumatology that sees God's grace at work in and through faith brands.

### **7.3 – The education of desire and the *Missio Dei***

In this regard, the work of Gorringe (2001), Sherry (2002) and Bosch (1991) offer important strands of reflection to add to Cavanaugh's insights as we develop our theology of branding. Taken together, the three of them offer a framework for understanding how the Holy Spirit might work in and through human beings and through creation in faith brands.

### **7.3.1 – Faith brands and the education of desire**

Gorringe (2001) argues that it is through our bodies – and our senses – that God explores creation “through the creature” and as such, they are a means of grace. This, of course, raises questions about disability, the abuse of our senses and, of course, consumer society. Gorringe is constructively critical of capitalism, acknowledging that as a system it is bound up with the changes that have brought us great advances, and therefore, greater life expectancy and greater expectations of life (2001:85). These very same things risk implicating capitalism in all sorts of other ethical and moral difficulties – and theologically, the charge of idolatry. Fukuyama (1994:241) argues that capitalism succeeds because it best “satisfies the most basic human longings.”

Gorringe's exploration of the nature of desire notes how in the New Testament, there is a positive sense for desire, *epithumia*. Jesus speaks of his desire to eat the Passover and Paul of his desire to see his friends (cf. Luke 22:15; 1 Thess 2:17). However, the overwhelming use of the word is negative. Reading Paul through the lens of Augustine's anti-Pelagian treatises has misrepresented the New Testament meaning over time, and reduced notions of desire to conceptions of sexual sin. However, in the parable of the sower, for example, it is “the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” which choke the word (Mark 4:19). In 1 Timothy 6:9, it again refers primarily to riches. In Colossians 3:5 it certainly means sex, but goes beyond it, and the passage goes on to speak of anger, malice, slander and abusive language. As Gorringe (2001:86) points out, Augustine rightly refers desire back to the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17), but here the command not to covet applies to house first of all, then to wife, the slave, the ox and the donkey “or anything else that belongs to your neighbour.” As Countryman (1990:151) argues, property and not sex is the key issue. Coveting is about failing to respect limits, failing, in any sphere, to acknowledge that enough is enough. In Paul's words, Gorringe argues, God hands us over to the power of our desires, and according to the authors of James and 1 Peter, following

our desires does not fulfil, but actually enslaves us (Rom 1:24; cf., e.g., 1 Pet 2:11, James 1:13-15). This is at the heart of the New Testament critique about desire: it is a form of addiction which destroys our freedom to serve God and neighbour, and may come to possess us and usurp the ultimate place in our heart which belongs to God alone. With Cavanaugh and Augustine, it is the *telos* which determines this - if consumer brands inflame our desires and turn us away from the things of God, they might well be argued to be idolatrous. The data in our study suggests that faith brands at their best, however, do the opposite.

Plato (1871, (1931)), and Aristotle (1956), like Augustine, see desire primarily as a lack, or an appetite; cumulating in Augustine's Christianisation of the argument of the *Symposium* in the opening movement of the *Confessions*. We have deep desires, and our deepest desire is to praise God:

"You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised (Ps. 47:2): great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable" (Ps. 146:5). Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you... to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." (1991, 1.1)

For Augustine, desire is based on a kind of lack; but it is a longing for the highest good, a view that became fundamental for commentators such as Bernard of Clairvaux and for the whole of medieval theology (Gorringe, 2001:89). It is also significant, given our emphasis on the *telos*, that sensual desires are, for Augustine and others following him, an unworthy impostor for the true form of desire. So, for Aquinas, the affective part of our souls is moved towards an attractive object; and the satisfying of the desire is joy. Love is always characterised by a drive to union, and *amor concupiscentiae*, the love of desire, is wanting good things for oneself or for the beloved. It is inferior to *amor amicitiae*, the love of friendship, love for its own sake. (Aquinas, 1981: 1a 2ae 26.2; 26.4; 28.4; Gorringe, 2001:89). Moore (1989) puts this tradition into contemporary terms as defining desire as discovering more and more of who we really are; as "love trying to happen", drawing into its fulfilling meaning all the appetites of our physical being. Agreeing with Aquinas that true desire always issues in union, Moore argues that desire's real opposite is egoism, and that it is precisely because we don't understand desire but equate it with egoism that we see the cross of Jesus opposed to it.

Real desire, however, is what the cross *empowers*, bring us to the death that its liberation entails. The death is the death of our present ego, whose perpetuation is the work of egoism posing as desire. (Moore, 1989:93).

Not all are happy to accept the characterisation of desire as a lack – Deleuze and Guattari (1984), who argue for an ontology of desire explicitly linked to capitalism, claim that only a priest would maintain such a thing. Having acknowledged this, however, Gorringe builds on Moore, through Freud's (1991) conception of desire as libido, (the energy of the love which strives after objects - a version of Aristotle's "appetite"), to argue that in both the Greek and Christian traditions, desire is something that requires energy, but that energy is not undifferentiated.<sup>68</sup> It requires distinctions, and the distinction between real desire and desire posing as egoism is central to any critique of consumer culture (and in this thesis, the function of brands), and the questions it raises about needlessly stimulated desires on the one hand, and real needs on the other; let alone the question of whether brands are in fact fostering and fulfilling desires that distract us from a more foundational desire for God.

An objection that might be raised to this is that the distinction between wrong desires and real needs is unworkable, because both desires and needs are socially constructed. Turner (1996:57) argues that the distinction between need and desire is false, because it is primarily a value judgement. But as Gorringe (2001:90) counters, all cultures ultimately rest on value judgements, and for that matter, on a distinction between desires and needs. The peculiarity of a consumerist culture is the attempt to obliterate the distinction, and many perceived "needs" in Western culture are perhaps more accurately termed "desires". On the other hand, it could be argued that brands have been drivers of technology, and key agents in social revolution and technological innovation over the past few centuries. Technology such as the vacuum cleaner and the automatic washing machine have hugely changed domestic and social norms – few if any households in this country any longer have to have an entire "wash day", and this has been part of the mix with regard to social transformations in, for example, the role of women, the existence and expansion of the concept of "leisure time", the pace and expectations of life, and so on. This blurring of the boundaries between desire and need is a complicated issue. Commentators will differ as to whether brands serve and emancipate us by meeting our needs, whether they exploit us by

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<sup>68</sup> Gorringe also helpfully reminds us that Freud, unlike many of his popularisers, did not make a simple equation between desire and the sex drive. Desire's job is finally, to put an end to human conflict as people are libidinally bound to each other in the service of Eros, that which brings life. Gorringe, 2001:89f.

creating needs, and, as we have seen in this last example, whether creating a need is always necessarily a bad thing anyway.

Gorringe (2001) contends that all high cultures argue that the non-divine imagination needs to be trained and exercised. Education is the recognition that the imagination only flourishes when it is trained, pruned, disciplined, and that it requires goals. From the perspective of Cavanaugh's (2008) Augustinian framework, and according to Gorringe, capitalism constitutes an education of desire away from a true *telos*, an education to refusing limits (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), a reverse or negative education that confines and limits humanity rather than drawing out its potential (Gorringe, 2001:92). As our above example suggests, this is a somewhat sweeping claim, and a wider theological study of branding would need to elaborate more clearly on the ways in which brands contribute towards human flourishing as well as diminish or distract us from our true end (see, for example, Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Such a study would need to explore whether brands were to be celebrated as part of our relationship with God's good creation, and whether brands (albeit imperfectly) express aspects of the kingdom in a fallen world, because - depending on the brand - they have the potential to improve our lives, if only modestly – or whether brands in fact distracted us from our true end and acted in a palliative way by creating a false sense of wellbeing (akin to Lynch's (2002) reservations, discussed earlier in this chapter, or Carrette & King's (2005) critique of some new age ideas).

In the context of this more limited study of faith brands, Gorringe's theology of the senses provides a basis on which we can critically affirm the role of faith brands. Brands like Alpha are explicitly attempting to orientate people towards God as the *telos* and publications like Alpha News make much not only of people's testimonies of conversion, but also how their lives have changed direction since their faith commitment. As we saw in chapter 5, critics of Alpha have argued it is a limited, particular and perhaps reductionist account of God (see, e.g., Percy, 1997; Heard 2009; Brian 2010) but our data suggested that participants in Alpha, as well as attenders at New Wine and Spring Harvest were able to exercise discernment and engage with a wider range of perspectives within the Christian scene than simply one faith brand. Indeed, talk of "the education of desire" provides a concept for use in how one distinguishes good or bad, or weaker and stronger elements within brands, the very human creation of which and recognition of that having been done is precisely what might save

them from an otherwise tendency towards absolutism. In this research, I would argue this finds expression within the self-conscious irony that some of our Focus group participants expressed around some aspects of the brands that they nevertheless could also see had helped themselves or others.

Where Christian discourse alters the Platonic debate, it does so by speaking of the goal of desire; the true, good and beautiful is God, and therefore the nature of desire is love, not as *eros* but as *agape*.<sup>69</sup> This passionate *agape* is understood by Gorringe as God educating and disciplining us; Christianity stands as an alternative education of desire, and monotheism, as understood by Judaism and Christianity, is an expression of this alternative education. It does not represent a prejudice against plurality, but rather part of the struggle for life, an insistence on ranking desires. Pantheons represent an attempt to make desires ultimate, and this, according to the prophetic analysis, destroys us. Monotheism, by contrast, concentrates us on the one thing needful. In the teaching of Jesus, Gorringe argues, this is found in the concept of discipleship. Jesus calls people to be disciples, to learn discipline – he is engaged in an education of desire (2001:92).

Our data in chapter 3 and 4 suggests that despite the problems branding can raise, the faith brands we have examined have functioned as a means through which participants perceived they have been drawn closer to God – they have functioned as “educators of desire”. Gorringe affirms the eucharist as a particular consumption habit that educates our desire, and suggests that the church needs to recover discipleship as a real “discipline”. Both of these correlate with how faith brands have functioned in practice - participants did not suggest faith brands acted in an exclusive way, but as part of an ongoing process that involved all sorts of other factors as well, including significant relationships with other people and engagement with the local church (which will of course include participation in its worship and liturgy). Consumer culture might well “educate desire” in a bad way at times, but faith brands can take the means of consumer culture and use them to direct our desires to a better *telos* – the worship of God, which as Smith (2009) argues, is itself a pedagogical practice that trains our love and redirects our desire towards God’s kingdom and its vision of human flourishing.

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<sup>69</sup> Gorringe does not wish to absolutise the distinction, but does believe that “it is fair to say that *agape* prioritises love for the unliveable, where *eros* prioritises the love which returns to me, affirms me and makes me feel good. The fragility of *eros* is what compels the relative distinction, but that passion of *eros* remains part of *agape*.” Gorringe, (2001:92). For more on *eros* and *agape*, as well as a good indicative bibliography, see Gunther, W. (1964).

### **7.3.2 – Faith brands and pneumatology – beauty, aesthetics, and faith brands.**

In fact, through the lens of pneumatology, I would want to go further than that and argue that faith brands can be celebrated because they are a way in which the Holy Spirit has been at work in culture – even a fallen, flawed consumer culture – and a way in which human beings partner with God through exercising their God-given creativity. Returning to our earlier reflections on creation, (Moltmann, 1985), as well as the work of Bosch (1991) and others in understanding the *missio Dei*, I would argue that to the extent that faith brands help orientate people to a right *telos*, they must legitimately be considered as spheres of God's activity. In fact, grounding a theology of branding in the doctrine of creation, whilst referencing eschatology alongside a theology of the Spirit is helpful because it opens up to us the possibility of viewing brands from the perspective of theological aesthetics, and enables us to draw upon the analysis of theologians like von Balthasar (1982-91), Wolterstorff (1980, 1997) and Sherry (2002). As Sherry (2002:2) notes, most theologians have linked beauty, both in nature and art, with the Holy Spirit. The full development of this idea involves the claim that God's Spirit communicates God's beauty throughout the world, both through creation, in the case of natural beauty, and through inspiration, in the case of artistic beauty. Earthly beauty is seen as a reflection of God's glory, and a sign of the way in which the Spirit is perfecting creation, and that beauty has an eschatological significance, as an anticipation of the restored and transfigured world which will be the fullness of God's kingdom.

As Sherry rightly notes, this is not merely to claim that God is the cause of beauty through the Spirit; the claim is being made that God is Himself beautiful, or indeed, some would say (in the language we reflected on earlier in this thesis) that God is beauty itself, and that earthly beauty participates in his nature or at least reflects it in some way. In fact, if the beauties of nature and art reflect God's glory, then they in fact *show* us something of Him. Alongside this, Wolterstorff (1980, 1997) argues that art can be understood partly an expression of self analogous to the creative self-expression of God the Creator, and also notes that some understandings of art also insist that the work of art is first of all not an imitation of nature, nor a bearer of a message, but a "new reality" (1980:53).



At this point, some might argue it is an uncomfortable stretch to apply this logic to branding, or even the creation of faith brands in particular. Certainly faith brands do not claim to be a “new reality” in the way Wolterstoff’s final point suggests. But debates about what might constitute art, or beauty are not straightforward (Wittgenstein, 1966, 1980; Tatarkiewicz, 1972, 1973; Dufrenne, 1973). As Sherry (2002:23) observes, an extreme example of this can be found in the “anti-art” of Duchamp, exemplified perhaps in his famous Fountain – which is a urinal. Faith brands should not (and do not) claim to be high art, but there is no doubt that their inception and development involves human imagination and creativity being exercised with the aim of drawing people to a true *telos*. Moreover, if earthly creativity participates in the divine nature, or at least reflect it in some way, and if our data is correct in demonstrating that participants have grown in their faith as a result of engagement with faith brands, then clearly, faith brands may represent a new way in which God discloses himself, since they represent a new arena for creativity and engagement with culture in the life of the church. Arguably, with the logic of Sherry, we could go even further than this – might faith brands also be regarded as God at play?

The Book of Proverbs describes wisdom as delighting God at creation and playing joyfully in His presence, and as at play everywhere in the world, delighting to be with the sons of men (sic) (8:30f.); and the Book of Job describes all the stars of the morning as singing with joy at the Creation (38:7). Barth too brought in an element of play in his tribute to Mozart...when he said “it may be that when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille*, they play Mozart and that then too our dear Lord listens with special pleasure.” That is a better note on which to end. The important thing is that we look (or listen), rejoice and give thanks. (Sherry, 2002:166)

### **7.3.3 – Barth, Bosch and the *missio Dei* – the relationship between soteriology and faith brands**

The final strand of thought in which this understanding of the Spirit and culture takes shape is related to the missionary theology of Bosch, and the notion of the *missio Dei*. The concept has been in Christian thought for centuries since Augustine (Poitras, 1999), but has been particularly significant since Barth's address to the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932. Understanding mission as an activity of God transforms one's view of the church and the world (Moltmann, 1977; Newbegin, 1996; Bosch, 1998). Mission is not something the church does or has, but a movement of God to the world – put succinctly, it is not that the church of God has a mission, but the God of a mission has a church (Bosch, 1998:390). In *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II, 1965) this wider understanding of mission was expounded primarily pneumatologically rather than christologically. As Bosch notes,

The history of the world is not only a history of evil, but also of love, a history in which the reign of God is being advanced through the work of the Spirit. Thus, in its missionary activity, the church encounters a humanity and a world in which God's salvation has already been operative secretly, through the Spirit. This may, by the grace of God, issue in a more humane world which, however, may never be seen as a purely human construct – the real author of this humanized history is the Holy Spirit. So *Gaudium et Spes* 26 can say, with reference to the social order and its development toward service to the common good, "The Spirit of God, who, with wondrous providence, directs the course of time and renews the faith of the earth, assists at this development." And even if paragraph 39 sounds a warning that "we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the Kingdom of God", it adds that "such progress is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God in so far as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society." (Bosch, 1998:391f)

This nuancing at the end is vital – the notion of the *missio Dei* is not some kind of ecclesial cloak for an uncritical, whiggish view of history as progress, but an affirmation of the Holy Spirit's role in history as being entirely consistent with scripture, and tied to God's redemptive work in the world. This does not imply it is an uncontested concept – some have raised concerns that it might allow an unassimilated American vision into the theology of mission (Rosin, 1972:26) or complained that more radical conceptions of it seem to *exclude* the church's involvement in mission (Wieser, 1966; Aring, 1971) and question whether the world needs the missionary contributions of Christians. This kind of argument has led Hoedemaker, (1988) to challenge the usefulness of the concept, because it is used by people who subscribe to mutually

exclusive theological positions. But, as Bosch (1998:392) rightly contends, it cannot be denied that the notion of *missio Dei* has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the church nor any other human agent can ever be considered as the author or bearer of mission. Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier/Sustainer, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission's origin is in the heart of God, and God is at work in the world. Bevans and Schroeder agree, and have nuanced discussion of the language of *missio Dei* by referring to God as mission (2004, 2011). This adds a helpful insight, although arguably, the division between being/doing is slightly false – it enriches one's understanding of the rootedness of mission in God, but too much emphasis on it runs the risk of lapsing into language games (Wittgenstein, 1953).

What is significant for the purposes of our discussion is that logically, it follows from this understanding of the *missio Dei*, that God if God is at work in the world, he will be at work even within consumer culture. Since branding is an intrinsic part of that culture, utilising branding as a methodology need not be seen as intrinsically problematic, and indeed, could be construed as a transformative act that joins with God where he is already actively at work. The data from our focus groups – perhaps especially Groups D & E, who recognised how central branding and style was to their culture – also supports this. Brands in consumer society act as a shorthand and as guarantors of quality.<sup>70</sup> Branding faith also achieves this – courses like *Alpha* catch on in part because their consistency gives people who have been on them confidence to suggest the course to others, and the branding and marketing ensures it becomes well known and easy to put on in new places, with a clear identity.

There was plenty of evidence in our data about how this worked in practice. Vicar I argued that people had “chosen” his church partly because the church was running *Alpha*, and that signalled a kind of ethos and style that they identified with. Interestingly, this indicates that branding also implies accountability – in the same way that “bad behaviour can hurt your brand” (Arminas, 2001) in the business world, or that businesses need to live up to the promises they make (Keller, 1998), churches and faith brands have to live up to the

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<sup>70</sup> In terms of their roles as “guarantors of quality” one could posit an analogous relationship between brands and the historic role of the apostles and their teaching in the early church in terms of their role in guaranteeing the quality/legitimacy of tradition – cf., e.g., Acts 15.

expectations that they set. Examples such as the Edie, Everard & Eleanor's discussion of the use of Scripture Union-branded materials, or consideration of the blend of factors which enabled Bernadette and Brian feel comfortable at New Wine offer strong corroboration for this in our data. In this respect, returning to Grant's earlier thesis that "brands are the new traditions" we might adapt his motif in the light of pneumatology and suggest that where the experience of Christian faith brands is authentically rooted in Christian tradition and is consistent with people's experience of them, they might function as "the new wisdom" – enabling people to engage creatively with a true *telos*.

#### **7.4 – Conclusion – towards a theology of Christian branding**

The aim of this study was to create an interpretative paradigm within which to evaluate faith brands theologically and identify whether faith brands are problematic or beneficial to Christian faith. Whether brands are problematic or beneficial was defined in terms of participants' own perceptions of whether a faith brand had helped or hindered them on their faith journey, and how interactions with the faith brand have impacted upon the way in which they narrate their faith story.

The research used qualitative research techniques – five focus groups drawn from a church in the East Midlands, triangulated with interviews with practitioners in both marketing and ministry, and documentary analysis of faith brands. An element of comparison was possible between focus groups by grouping those church members who self-identified as "charismatic/evangelical" into three groups and examining how the data generated in those groups compared with the other two groups, drawn from a more "central Anglican" tradition.

Rational Choice Theory was also used as a critical and heuristic lens through which to examine the data, and as the thesis progressed I argued that the data demonstrates that RCT is an inadequate tool to explain the variety of motives and factors that lead to someone making a decision to engage in a Christian faith journey, although it does offer some useful insights. Particularly, the notion of social capital (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985 and 1987; Iannacone, 1997; Starke and Finke, 2000; Lechner, 2007) has been proved to be a helpful

insight in understanding some reasons why people might choose to engage with particular churches and how faith brands might influence a part of their decision making. To quote but one example of this, Edie, Everard and Eleanor's discussion of Scripture Union in chapter 4 showed how faith brands offer a kind of shorthand which enabled people to feel reassurance and understanding about the aspects and school of theology they are engaging with.

In chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis the importance of relationships and the motif of faith being a journey/process were validated by the data. Some of the problematic issues that faith brands raise for Christian faith – including the way in which they might pose a challenge to traditional ecclesiology, or risk encouraging a reductionist account to faith - were identified, and these two issues were then explored in more depth in chapter 5 and 6. Global/national faith brands such as the Alpha course which might be considered as “McDonaldising” the faith we contrasted with more “localized” faith brands, embodied within the “Fresh Expressions” movement, and I have argued that the data suggests that although faith brands do pose risks for Christian faith they can also be beneficial where they are utilized in ways that are sensitive to the context in which individuals are relating to them. It is possible to utilize the medium without compromising the message, and the insights of Winter (1973) on modality/sodality suggest that whilst faith brands do challenge traditional ecclesiology they also play a role that complements the established structures of the church.

This PhD makes an original contribution to knowledge in three principal ways.

Firstly, through exploring in detail the impact of faith branding upon some members of East Midlands Churches, in itself an original focus of study.

Secondly, this thesis makes an original contribution by utilising the insights of Rational Choice Theory to interrogate the data, and by using the narrated faith journeys to highlight some of the inadequacies of RCT as a total account of how people make religious choices.

Finally, in the last chapter, this thesis has extended the field of Practical Theology in beginning to outline the contours of an emerging theology of branding.

The Apostle Paul's contextual missionary flexibility is noted alongside an acknowledgement that creation is both fallen, and yet also nevertheless pregnant with goodness and grace. It is suggested, through drawing on insights in the work of Cavanaugh (2008), that faith brands can be located comfortably within an Augustinian framework with respect to notions of choice and desire. Within a theological evaluation, faith brands could be seen to offer a way of seeking to influence the will towards God – and as such, offer a counterpoint to consumer brands, because they are a means to what is understood theologically to be a true end (God), whereas in consumerism, the end is simply to continue desiring to buy. Finally, the notion of the *missio Dei* and Bosch (1991) & Sherry's (2002) theology of the work of the Holy Spirit are offered as ways of understanding of how God works through human culture and human creativity. The theological strands I have explored above are only indicative at this stage, but they do nevertheless provide the contours for an emerging theology of Christian branding. Moreover, I suggest that these strands all resonate with the data from our study.

If I were drawing up an agenda for further research it might seek to develop focus groups beyond the sample I have examined, as well as considering particular “contemporary” faith brands – such as Messy Church, around which there are all sorts of contemporary debates about ecclesiology, mission and the faith journey (see, e.g., Lings, 2013; Paul, (ed) 2017). It would also be interesting to examine how a different country's context might look different from that of the UK.

The limitations of space within this study means that these strands form the beginnings of a theology of Christian faith brands, rather than a fully finished offering. However, they demonstrate that a theology of Christian branding can, without denying the problems inherent in branding faith, argue in a way that is fully consistent both with the data in this study and with Christian theology that God is indeed at work in and through Christian faith brands as a way of drawing people to himself. With Einstein (2007), and without denying the complexity of the process, this study has shown from the experiences of members of some East Midlands churches that in a consumer society, Brands can be a characteristic means of incarnating the gospel, without becoming the end in themselves.

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**Appendix A: -RD5 Section 7, in relation to questions about research ethics.**

**7. Research Ethics** - advice for completing this section is available from the Research Ethics website

☒☐

Does the proposed study entail ethical considerations?    **Yes**                      **No**

If 'yes', please indicate how you intend to address each of the points, as appropriate.

*All research entails ethical consideration. The ethical consideration of my research will take place in relation to the principles of **non-maleficance** and **beneficence**, indicating a systematic regard for the rights and interests of others in the full range of academic relationships and activities.*

*In this regard, **non-maleficance** is the principle of doing, or permitting, no official misconduct. It is the principle of doing no harm in the widest sense. **Beneficence** is the requirement to serve the interests and well being of others, including respect for their rights. It is the principle of doing good in the widest sense.*

*These definition come from the University of Derby's own research ethics policy document, found at <http://www.derby.ac.uk/research/ethics/policy-document>, and the research will be carried out in accordance with the guidelines set out within it.*

<b>Consent</b>  Participation in the research will be on the basis of informed consent and participants' rights of privacy should be guaranteed. Participants will have the right to withdraw at any time and are not obliged to continue if they do not wish to.  Prior to gaining informed consent I will ensure that participants are fully informed of the nature and the purpose of the research well in advance of the work to be carried out.	<b>Observation research</b>  n/a
<b>Debriefing</b>  Participants will be debriefed following their participation, and offered opportunities to discuss elements of the research further if that is helpful; their capacity to comment on the transcript of data collected will be considered, but may or may not be appropriate depending on the research method in question, which has not yet been finalised.	<b>Research undertaken in public places</b>  Consideration will be given to balance the parameters of academic freedom and free speech with responsibility to the community, especially with regard to religious sensitivity.
<b>Withdrawal from the investigation</b>  Participants may withdraw from the investigation at any point until the writing up	<b>Academic integrity</b>  The general principle of integrity should inform all research activities. Honesty should

<p>of the data (they will have been offered access to a summary of the research findings prior to writing up).</p>	<p>be central to the relationship between researcher, participant and other interested parties.</p> <p>Research outputs should contain acknowledgements of the work of others as appropriate.</p> <p>Participants and other relevant stakeholders will be offered access where appropriate to a summary of the research findings. Research reports will be truthful, accurate and demonstrably the work of the author concerned.</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality and data protection</b></p> <p>Participants' confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, and their personal privacy protected.</p> <p>The collection, storage, disclosure and use of research data by researchers will comply with the Data Protection Act 1998.</p> <p>Research undertaken with users and participants will be premised upon a clear agreement regarding the use of confidential information.</p>	<p><b>Animal rights</b></p> <p>n/a</p>
<p><b>Protection of participants</b></p> <p>See above, "Confidentiality and data protection".</p> <p>As the risk assessment says, thought has been given to the potential physiological, psychological, social, political, religious, environmental, cultural and economic impact of the research on participants, and on providing existing control measures to limit this impact/provide support for participants during and after the research process.</p>	<p><b>Contractual responsibilities</b></p> <p>n/a – save that particular thought needs to be given to the role of the researcher as a chaplain here at the University, and a public office holder (Clerk in Holy Orders) in the Church of England.</p>

Has clearance from any other body/organisation been received (e.g. internal ethics committee e.g. psychology or local education authority)?

No

If 'yes', who?.....

Does any other Code/s of Practice of Professional Bodies apply? No

If 'yes', which one(s)? (e.g. British Psychological Society).....

Are you a member of a Professional Body? No (please specify below)

.....  
.....

Please specify below which member(s) of your supervisory team are members of the above-mentioned professional bodies?

.....  
.....

Is NHS Ethical Approval required? (see <http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>) Yes ☒ No

**If the answer is 'yes' then you and your supervisor must prepare an appropriate application and have it approved by an MREC or LREC committee. This can be a difficult process and it can take considerable time. Advice can be gained from your Faculty's representative on the University Ethics Committee.**

*NOTE: In submitting this section you are confirming that you have read and understood the University of Derby's **Code of Practice on Research Ethics**. You are also confirming that, if approved, this research will be conducted in full accordance with the code.*

## **Appendix B: Informed consent forms used in the investigation**

### **Focus group consent form**

This consent form outlines my rights as a participant in an investigation into the role of faith brands in the development of the faith of members of an East Midlands Church, conducted by Chris Hodder as part of his MRes.

The research will explore the impact of faith brands on the faith development of participants, and some of the theological implications of the development of faith brands. It will explore how faith brands compare with the importance of the local church, and see if it is possible to measure the impact of faith branded models against other local approaches.

The focus group will explore my attitudes about:

- How my faith has developed, and what in my opinion have been the most significant elements in my faith development.
- Whether faith brands been significant in my faith journey, and if so, which ones, and how?
- How I feel faith brands may have influenced society, or the wider church?
- My view of the increasing prevalence of faith brands?

The focus group will take under an hour and will include between 4-10 people from an identified East Midlands church.

I understand that:

1. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary.
2. It is my right to decline to answer any question that I am asked.
3. I am free to leave the focus group at any time.
4. My name and identity will remain confidential in any publications or discussions.
5. My name will not appear on any tapes or transcripts resulting from the interview.

I HAVE READ THIS CONSENT FORM. I HAVE HAD A CHANCE TO ASK QUESTIONS CONCERNING ANY AREAS THAT I DID NOT UNDERSTAND.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature of Interviewee)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Print name) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

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You may decline to participate in this study. You may end your participation in this study at any time. Maintaining your anonymity is a priority and every practical precaution will be taken to disguise your identity. There will not be any identifying information on transcripts of this interview. I will not allow anyone other than the research advisor to hear any audiotape of your voice or review a transcript of the focus group. All materials generated from the focus group (e.g. audiotapes and transcripts) will remain in my physical possession.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Interviewer and Date)

### Interview consent form

This consent form outlines my rights as a participant in an investigation into the role of faith brands in the development of the faith of members of an East Midlands Church, conducted by Chris Hodder as part of his MRes.

The research will explore the impact of faith brands on the faith development of members of an East Midlands Church, and some of the theological implications of the development of faith brands. It will explore how faith brands compare with the importance of the local church, and see if it is possible to measure the impact of faith branded models against other local approaches.

The interview will explore:

- How my faith has developed, and what in my opinion have been the most significant elements in my faith development.
- Whether faith brands been significant in my faith journey, and if so, which ones, and how?
- How I feel faith brands may have influenced society, or the wider church?
- My view of the increasing prevalence of faith brands?

The interview will take up to 1 hour. I understand that:

1. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary.
2. It is my right to decline to answer any question that I am asked.
3. I am free to leave the interview at any time.
4. My name and identity will remain confidential in any publications or discussions.
5. My name will not appear on any tapes or transcripts resulting from the interview.

I HAVE READ THIS CONSENT FORM. I HAVE HAD A CHANCE TO ASK QUESTIONS CONCERNING ANY AREAS THAT I DID NOT UNDERSTAND.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature of Interviewee)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Print name) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

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You may decline to participate in this study. You may end your participation in this study at any time. Maintaining your anonymity is a priority and every practical precaution will be taken to disguise your identity. There will not be any identifying information on transcripts of this interview. I will not allow anyone other than the research advisor to hear any audiotape of your voice or review a transcript of the interview. All materials generated from the interview (e.g. audiotapes and transcripts) will remain in my physical possession.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Interviewer and Date)

